



**FINAL DESTINATION**

NEW LINE CINEMA



A NOVEL BY REBECCA LEVENE

# END OF THE LINE

BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION PICTURE  
'FINAL DESTINATION' CREATED BY JEFFREY REDDICK

# PROLOGUE

The air in the half-finished corridor was chilly and dank, heavy with cement dust from the nearby building work. Now the moment had come, Kate was more afraid than she'd thought possible. She ran a hand back through her tangled red hair and looked round at her fellow students, standing round her in relaxed twos and threes. One of them—Jenny, a sharp-faced blonde—caught Kate's eye and smiled. Kate thought there was an edge to the smile, though; even now they thought she'd back out of it.

She sure as hell should back out. She was in med school now, not high school—she shouldn't care about hanging with the cool kids. But when, three days ago, they'd asked her if she wanted to play a little game—and then smiled slyly at each other, as if sure that hardworking, cautious Kate would be too scared—she'd been so angry that she'd instantly said yes. How could she have been so stupid?

But of course she knew the answer. She accepted their challenge precisely because she'd never usually take part in anything so stupid. She was doing it to prove that she could.

The game was called Sux Racing, and medical students had been playing it pretty much as long as the anesthetic drug, Suxamethonium, had been around. The first "contestant" was getting ready now, standing on the chalked starting line which had been drawn at the far end of the corridor. The contestant, a young man with an overlarge Adam's apple that bobbed as he swallowed nervously, rolled up his sleeve and presented his arm to the woman beside him. She carefully dabbed some alcohol onto it, tongue nipped between her teeth in concentration, then slipped the needle under his skin and depressed the plunger on the syringe.

He waited a second after she'd finished, as if shocked that she'd actually gone through with it, then set off running down the corridor at full pelt.

He didn't get very far. After a few paces, the drug began to kick in, quickly paralyzing every voluntary muscle in his body so that his

steps began to drag until—with startling suddenness—he collapsed to the ground. His head made a dull thud against the concrete floor.

As soon as he was down, Jenny rushed forward and began to attach a ventilator to his mouth. Her fingers seemed clumsy with nerves, or perhaps excitement, but after a moment she gave a thumbs up to indicate that the machine was working. There was a round of relieved, too-loud laughter from the surrounding students, and a few ragged cheers as one of them marked off the position of the body on the floor, indicating how far the contestant had managed to run before collapsing. The contestant himself stared up at the ceiling, unblinking, conscious but utterly unable to move. It was impossible to tell how he felt and no one around really seemed to care.

Kate, her eyes still fixed on the young man, felt a prickling in her back and looked up to find that everyone was staring at her. It was her turn.

Heart thudding in her chest, she made her way over to the starting line, stepping over the young man's body on the way. As she did, her eyes momentarily met his, and in the blank intensity of his stare she felt something, a threat or a warning. She shuddered, but carried on. Too late to back out now.

Once she reached the line, she slowly rolled up the sleeve of her loose-fitting green blouse. She knew she was being a coward—that the game only really seemed dangerous and as for the chances of getting caught; that was why they were doing it here, at night, in a wing of the hospital that was still under construction. It didn't matter, though. She was still as scared as hell. She flinched involuntarily away as the syringe approached her arm. The young woman administering the injection frowned, then grabbed hold of her elbow and plunged the needle in.

There was a sharp, deep pain, worse than she'd expected. She imagined that she could feel the paralysis already, an icy numbness pumping through her veins. Glaring defiantly at the other students, she forced her legs into motion, flinging herself down the corridor towards them. And then, after a moment, she realized that the numbness had not been illusory, that it was spreading, that it had already taken her arm and that—

—before she could complete the thought, the drug had completed its work and she dropped to the floor with a jarring impact. She'd landed with her head twisted to one side, so she was able to see Jenny as she ran towards her, ventilator and oxygen tank cradled in her arms.

Through the haze of fear and the horrible feeling of needing to breathe, and being utterly unable to, she clung on to one thought. It would all be over soon. Once the ventilator was pumping oxygen into her lungs the panic would end and she could wait out the easing of the drug's effect knowing that she'd done it, she'd proved something important not so much to them, but to herself. She tried to smile at Jenny as she fixed the mask over her face, but she couldn't. Jenny, though, was smiling at her.

And then, terrifyingly, her smile slipped. Somewhere, out of Kate's sight, Jenny was frantically adjusting something, but whatever she was trying to do failed and when she looked back at Kate her eyes were wild.

"Doug! Doug! Get the fuck over here! The oxygen tank's jammed!" Jenny shouted in a voice shrill with panic.

At her words, everyone gathered round in a tight knot. Kate, trying hopelessly to gasp for breath, felt suddenly claustrophobic, as if all the people around her were sucking the remaining air out of her. There were hands, voices all round her, more exclamations, but it was too late. She could feel a darkness engulfing her, a nothingness from which she knew she wouldn't return. Everything, her vision, her hearing, her identity, began fading to gray.

And then she wasn't looking up at the people crowded fearfully around her, she was looking down, as if she was floating somewhere near the ceiling. She called out to them, but no sound emerged. She realized she had no mouth to call with. There was nothing left of her except this terrified cloud of consciousness. Frantic, she tried to force her way back down to her body, to make herself live again.

She got a close look at the people clustered round her fallen body and instead tried to push herself away from them. They were like moving corpses, flesh hanging off their bodies in ragged ribbons, scrubs stained a deep crimson. Jenny's fair hair was matted with

gore, and her eye sockets were empty holes. Beside her, a young man ran a hand back through his hair, and Kate saw that his fingers were like a skeleton's, as if someone had run a wire stripper over his bones. Another student was crawling with maggots, moving over and through his rotting flesh. A maggot dropped from his mouth into the body's beneath him as he bent to give it the kiss of life.

Kate was still screaming when the oxygen being breathed into her lungs reawakened her brain and her body jerked back to life.

# ONE

The walls and ceiling were literally dripping with sweat. When a droplet splashed onto Rinoka's arm and she licked it off, she could taste the salt. She laughed and turned to tell Cho, but Cho was dancing with a cute boy and Rinoka didn't think she wanted to be disturbed. The music was amazing, amazing, the best she'd ever heard—though a distant part of her mind remembered that she thought this every time she came to the club and that it might have more to do with the drugs swilling through her system than the actual quality of the DJing. Still—what a night!

For a while, she let the music take her and surrendered to the feeling that her body had a mind of its own and the only thing on that mind was dancing. She grinned round at the other people on the dance floor, shouting out "Nice T-shirt" to one boy wearing a picture of Wakka from *Final Fantasy X*. He grinned back at her and everything was absolutely perfect. After a while, though, she started to feel a little lonely and wandered off to find one of her other friends.

Haru was slumped in a corner. He'd been trying K. He'd never done it before and he'd taken too much, but it was okay because she could see in his eyes that whatever he was seeing made him happy, so she left him to it. Eventually she found Kichi and Takai who were on the same vibe she was. As soon as they saw her they enfolded her in a big warm hug that was damp with sweat, but she didn't care.

"Isn't this the best?" she shouted out.

"Yeah, yeah, it's fantastic," Takai said. "It's like..." He drifted off as his eyes glazed over, their whites almost obscured behind the dark full moon of his pupils, and she could tell that he'd lost the thread of his thoughts and couldn't pick it up again. His hair, normally carefully gelled into great brown tufts, was plastered flat to his head, and his mouth was fixed in a rictus grin. She could see his jaw clenching rhythmically around the chewing gum she'd given him eight hours ago at the start of the night.

"You're beautiful," she told him and he gave her another hug, stroking his fingers up her back in a gesture that was purely sensual, drained of all sexual content.

"Hey, hey," Kichi suddenly said. "Your flight. Aren't you supposed to be at the airport now?"

Rinoka looked at her watch. It was 6:30 in the morning. "Not for another two hours," she said. She slipped another pill out of her pocket and bit off half, grimacing at the bitter chemical taste of it.

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Kate ran as fast as she could, but it was like her legs were stuck in treacle, and no matter how fast she ran the giant maggot humping over the ground behind her crawled faster. She screamed in fear as its mouth opened wide to swallow her whole—and woke to find herself still screaming.

Desperate, she reached above her for the light switch and yanked it on. She sat up, gasping for breath in the pale yellow light it cast over the room. Her whole body was slick with sweat and her legs were hopelessly tangled up in the bedclothes, no doubt adding to the sensation of being trapped she'd experienced in the dream. Damn it, this was the fifth night in a row! That stupid game was over a week ago, she told herself. Get over it already!

Beside her in the bed there was a soft grunt as Brad emerged into wakefulness with his customary ill grace. His square-jawed face, which usually seemed handsome and kind to her, was red and creased from the pillow, and the dark stubble on his chin looked like some kind of skin infection. "Jesus, Kate," he said, but he reached out a hand towards her.

She grabbed it in her own—too hard, she knew. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Go back to sleep, I'll switch off the light."

But Brad pushed himself into a sitting position beside her, running a hand through his rumpled black hair. "Again?"

"No, I'm just screaming for the hell of it!" she snapped. She breathed out, hard, trying to calm herself. "I can't take much more of this."

"It's just a dream," Brad told her, his voice equally sharp.

She managed a slight smile. "Easy to say when you're not the one getting eaten alive every night by giant maggots. I mean, it's so cheesy apart from anything else. I'm being driven crazy by a fifties B-movie."

Brad didn't smile back. "You've got to get over this."

"I know. I'm trying!"

"I can't understand why you took part in that stupid game anyway. Why didn't you ask me about it first?"

Kate felt anger beginning to bubble up inside her. "Believe it or not, I don't have to ask your permission for everything I do in my life!"

"No," Brad said with biting sarcasm. "Because you make such great decisions on your own."

There was no arguing with him in this mood, she knew that from experience. "Go to sleep," she said again and switched off the light. Brad muttered irritably but didn't say anything further. After a few moments she heard the first faint snores from his side of the bed.

She lay in the darkness, staring up unseeingly at the ceiling, wishing she dared go back to sleep herself.

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Peter felt he should be more excited. This was, after all, the first time he'd be traveling outside Germany in his eighteen-year life. But as he packed his suitcase, carefully rolling his T-shirts and shorts into tight little balls, as he'd read in the guidebook you were supposed to do, the main feeling he experienced was apprehension. Maybe it had something to do with the litany of impending disasters his father was reciting to him as he packed.

"There's crime, of course," he was saying now, his voice crisp and formal and devoid of warmth. Even though in two hours' time he would be driving Peter to Munich airport, his father was dressed in his usual suit and tie, his graying hair slicked back and his beard impeccably trimmed. Peter sometimes wondered if his father ever relaxed, even when he was asleep. "This isn't like some school trip to



Berlin, you know. In New York they won't stop at snatching your bag, they'll shoot you just for the fun of it."

"But father," Peter turned to face him, clutching his wash bag against his chest. "New York isn't that bad these days. They had a big clean up. Zero tolerance. Made everything a lot safer."

"So they tell us," Peter's father said, his tone gloomy. "But it's not the physical danger I'm worried about."

Well, *thanks*, Peter wanted to say, but he bit his lip. He didn't want to argue with his father just before he left. It would sour the whole vacation.

"It's the spiritual danger, Peter, that's what concerns me," the older man continued. "America is a land of temptations. Here I've been able to defend you from the evil of the world, but there you'll be on your own. You'll have to look into your own heart and ask Christ's guidance for yourself if you're to know what's right or wrong."

"If I feel myself tempted to sin, I can always give you a call," Peter joked.

Unsurprisingly, his father didn't smile. "Better you don't put yourself in the path of temptation in the first place."

"Yes, father," Peter said obediently. Any other response would only invite a further lecture. Besides, he was worried himself about what New York would confront him with. When he'd been accepted for a place on this student cultural exchange four months ago, he'd been ecstatic. Finally, he'd get away, see the world and learn something that wasn't taught to him by his father. But as the day had drawn nearer he'd begun to wonder if it was all a terrible mistake. Maybe his father hadn't been hiding the world from him, but shielding him from it. Maybe he wasn't strong enough to face it on his own.

"I'm packed," Peter told him now. "I think I'll go outside for some fresh air before the drive."

His father nodded his head and turned back to his study of the map, figuring out the best possible route to take to the airport. Earlier, Peter had actually seen him using a tape measure, testing to see which road was shortest. Fulfilling our national stereotype, Peter had thought and smiled a little.

Now, as he wandered into the vibrant green richness of the countryside outside their house, he found his feet taking him in a particular direction that didn't really surprise him.

The graveyard was nestled at the back of the church, hidden by dense trees from the surrounding mountains. At this time of year it was a riot of colors and the grass resonated with the clicking and buzzing of insects.

His mother's grave was at the back, near the crumbling stone wall. Before he reached it, Peter stooped to pick some pretty pale blue flowers that his father, in a rare unguarded moment, had told him were his mother's favorites. He laid them on the headstone before settling himself on his knees beside it.

When he'd been younger, he'd often come here to talk to the gravestone of the mother he'd never had the chance to know. He'd always been aware at school of being different, of lacking something very important that the other children all had and this had helped make him feel somehow connected. It had allowed him to kid himself that his mother was with him really, watching somewhere just out of sight.

He didn't believe that now, of course, but he still found it comforting to visit her. He liked to imagine that his mother had been all the things his father wasn't: loving, kind, full of fun and life. But maybe his father had been that way too before his mother died giving birth to him. The religion had always been strong, of course, or his mother might not have died at all—without the faith that forbade it, his father might have been able to make the decision to sacrifice his unborn son to save his wife. But he hadn't and so here Peter was now, about to go off to a strange new country. And here his mother was, asleep in the ground.

He sighed and stood up. Even though it wasn't something he did any more, he wanted to leave his mother some parting words. But he found he didn't know what to say. "Wish me luck," he said eventually. He couldn't escape the feeling that he was going to need it.

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In the morning Brad didn't say anything more and when she cooked him a stack of pancakes as a sort of apology he only grunted and ate them while reading *The Wall Street Journal*, so she knew she wasn't forgiven. She felt another flare of anger, but she reminded herself that he'd been going without proper sleep the same as her ever since the nightmares had started, and it was all completely her fault. Which made it much worse, of course, but she knew Brad wouldn't understand that.

Brad, as usual, was ready first and hovered accusingly by the door as she brushed her teeth in the small chrome-covered bathroom. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she did and almost recoiled. Her hair was tangled in blood-colored clumps. Her freckles looked like pits in her face and the shadows under her eyes were so deep she looked like she needed to go into some kind of rehab. Great. That was really going to impress everyone at the hospital. It was amazing Brad would even agree to be seen in public with her at the moment.

In fact, she wondered if he was ashamed. As soon as they stepped out of their Upper East Side apartment he lengthened his stride till he was a good three paces in front of her. She trotted to keep up, brushing against the scaffolding that blocked half the sidewalk and he just quickened his pace further.

"Brad, slow down," she said, irritated.

"We're late," he reminded her, "and I need to make a good impression. Do you know how many applicants they get for each surgical residency at St Stephen's?"

She did know. It was eighty, as he'd frequently reminded her, but he didn't wait for a response and she was forced to carry on trotting at his heels. Taken up with worries about whether things would ever be right between her and Brad again, she didn't notice that the lights had flicked to red in front of her and only woke out of her daze when the background hum of traffic hooting rose to a crescendo and a yellow cab almost clipped her as its brakes shrieked it to a halt.

Brad jerked her arm, pulling her back to the sidewalk. "Be careful!"

For an instant, her eyes locked with those of the driver. He was dark-skinned with a shock of spiky black hair—Indian, she guessed, or maybe Bangladeshi, but the bird he flipped her was pure New York. She looked away, embarrassed, but as she did the glitter of something bright and wavering caught her eye. At first she thought that the driver had lit up a cigarette, that the flames she could see dancing around his head were nothing more than the product of tobacco. But the fire seemed far too intense for that. And the flames weren't coming from his mouth.

The driver's face, his whole head, was an orange bloom of fire.

Brad had pulled her away from the curb by then and he was saying something to her but she couldn't hear it because she couldn't tear her eyes away from the taxi driver and his unnaturally flaming head.

At first it was surreal, almost funny, until the flames began to scorch his flesh and she saw the fat underneath bubble, letting out a horrible thick dark smoke as the skin on his cheeks melted and flaked. Even from this distance, she could smell the overcooked meat scent of it. But the worst was when his eyes popped with a wet squelch.

She looked away, gagging and found Brad staring into her eyes with equal parts concern and annoyance. "Kate! Kate, what is it?"

"It's..." she began, helplessly looking back at the driver only to see him still staring at her through annoyed brown eyes, his face utterly unblemished. She shook her head, trying to clear it, wondering if she really could be going mad.

"Well, come on then," Brad snapped. "We're late enough already."

The lights had changed to green but the taxi driver, his attention still fixed on Kate, hadn't noticed. Watching her and not the traffic, he floored the pedal and the car heaved then jerked off. Brad jumped back, pushing out an arm to keep Kate from crossing. The taxi veered into the junction, just as the other line of traffic had picked up speed.

As Kate watched, mesmerized, the two-ton truck at the head of the column smashed straight into the taxi at what must have been a good thirty miles per hour. There was a deafening screech of metal twisted in ways its maker didn't intend. The taxi flew end over end to land, trunk down, in the center of the road. As the fuel trunk split,

spraying gas in every direction, the impact sparked a flame from the pavement that caught the whole concoction and turned it—and the taxi—into a pyre.

For a very brief moment, Kate saw the driver, trapped inside his cab, flaming and screaming like a living torch. Then Brad pulled her away and into the protective circle of his arms. "Don't look, babe," he said. "You don't need to see that."

Sobbing into his chest, Kate didn't know how to tell him that she already had.

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Copenhagen airport was one of Bodil's least favorite places. All through her childhood she had memories of coming here, brought by one of the ten or so nannies who drifted through her life and waving goodbye to the parents she hardly knew as they embarked on yet another business trip to a country they'd always promised to take her to but never seemed to find the time.

This time, they were here to wave her off, but other than that not much seemed to have changed. Her flight had been announced and she was near the front of the line for the gate, but her father wasn't anywhere in sight; he'd noticed a shop selling some of his competitor's product range and spotting a business opportunity where he pulled aside the manager and asked whether he might consider changing brands. Her mother was with her, but only in body. A call had come through five minutes ago and with a grimaced "Sorry darling, I have to take this" she'd answered and had been spouting some kind of shit about shares and hedge funds ever since.

Bodil sighed, but it wasn't like she particularly wanted to talk to her parents anyway. She'd been out late last night, at a goodbye party her friends had thrown, and her head was feeling deeply delicate this morning. She caught a glimpse of herself in the polished steel surface of one of the pillars and saw that her blue eyes were underscored with deep shadows. Her honey-colored hair, obnoxiously curly, was its usual sorry mess but at least she'd remembered to wear her favorite good-luck charm, a turquoise shape that the shopkeeper had

assured her was Native American in origin but which she suspected was native Danish via some factory in Taiwan.

There were only five people in front of her in the line when she rested her hand in her back pocket and felt a suspicious lump under her fingers. At about the same time she became aware that there was a herbal smell hanging around her that didn't have anything to do with the expensive perfume her mother's secretary had bought on her behalf as a going-away present. It was the unmistakable smell of weed.

"Oh shit!" she said.

Her mother frowned at her, covering the mouthpiece of her phone with one elegantly manicured hand. "What?" she mouthed.

"I have to take a piss," Bodil told her. "Keep my place." She ducked away before her mother could object to either the language or the request.

As soon as she'd realized she was walking around one of the most heavily policed places in the country with a piece of hash in her back pocket, she became acutely aware of the eyes of everyone around her. They suddenly all seemed to be following her, scrutinizing her every move and she could swear she heard the huddles of travelers she passed whispering about her as soon as her back was turned.

It's just paranoia, she told herself, but she was still relieved when she finally made it to the nearest restroom and locked herself into a cubicle. Checking to see that there was no hidden camera peering at her from a dark corner—these days, you couldn't be sure and the security staff had to get their kicks somehow—she pulled the lump out of her pocket.

It was a big one, enough to keep her going for a good three days. The greasy-green smell instantly strengthened as she unwrapped the hash from its foil packet and she jumped as a toilet flushed two cubicles down. She wondered if the smell could reach that far. Better get rid of it quick.

Her hand poised over the toilet bowl, ready to drop. But somehow she just couldn't. It seemed such a waste. Damn it, it was a long flight, twelve hours including the changeover in London and she'd checked which movies were on and she'd seen all of them already.

Shrugging, she popped the lump of hash into her mouth and swallowed, wincing as it grazed her throat. Then she carefully flushed the wrapper down the bowl, brushed the crumbs from her hands and strode back out into the airport. The smell was still lingering about her, but the evidence was gone and it wasn't like her parents would know what it was. They'd smelled it emanating from her room for the last seven years and all they'd ever asked was where she got those incense sticks from and why did she have to be into all that hippy nonsense anyway?

She returned to the queue to find her father was back and that she was the next in line. She grabbed her bags, slung them over her shoulder and gave each of her parents a quick peck on the cheek, then hurried through passport control. Suddenly, she was looking forward to this trip a lot more than she had been.

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James was disgusted with how filthy the plane was. He'd cleaned the pull-down table with the hygienic wipes he always kept with him and he'd laid one of his perfectly pressed white handkerchiefs on the seat before he let his bottom go anywhere near it, but he still felt horribly grubby. And now the food!

He looked at the plate in front of him with barely disguised loathing. They could hardly have made it any less appetizing if they'd tried and maybe they had. The flight attendant caught his expression. "Is there something the matter, sir?" she asked with thinly veiled impatience.

"Is this the only option?" he said, nodding at the watery chicken concoction in front of him.

"Well, there's the vegetarian," she said.

"And is that actually edible as opposed to merely organic?"

The flight attendant smiled the well-practiced smile of a woman whose entire job consisted of dealing with sleep-deprived assholes. "It's feta salad—"

"All right, I'll take that," he told her.

"But I'm afraid that's only available to people who've pre-ordered it." She moved off before he had the chance to say anything else, looking smug.

James grimaced, pushing the limp vegetables around the plastic tray with a plastic fork and reminding himself that the body could survive perfectly well for three weeks without food.

"Don't eat it. It's dangerous," the girl beside him said in a lilting Scandinavian accent. They were the first words she'd spoken since they got on the plane.

"Dangerous?" he asked, subtly edging away from her as far as the narrow seat would allow. Her eyes were bloodshot, her blond curls were plastered to her head, and the expression on her face didn't look entirely sane.

"It's running away from you, can't you see?"

"Right," James nodded, edging even further away and staring resolutely forward in the vain hope that she'd get the message and stop talking to him. Obviously, it didn't work.

"The people behind have been talking about it the whole time. They're trying to poison me, you know."

Desperate, James rooted around in his bag for the copy of *New Scientist* he'd brought with him. As he pulled it out, it caught on the edge of something and a gift-wrapped package fell out onto the floor. James realized that it was his mother's parting present—to keep him safe while he was away, she'd said—which he'd entirely forgotten to open. He pulled it into his lap, carefully peeling off the strips of tape and folding back the wrapping paper so that it didn't tear.

Then he looked down at the strange round feathery contraption in front of him and sighed.

"What's that?" the Scandinavian girl asked.

"It's a Native American dream catcher," James told her neutrally. "It's supposed to catch bad dreams before they reach you so you can get a good night's sleep."

"Does it work?"

James broke his own rule and turned to face her. "Yes, yes it does," he said with heavy sarcasm. "Somehow it magically enters your mind, interacts with your REM cycle and prevents certain neurons



from triggering the dormant links to buried memories. And it achieves all this despite being made of..." He examined the object carefully. "Bamboo, feathers and plastic beads."

The girl smiled. "Cool. Maybe I can get one for myself in America. I'm going on a cultural exchange trip, you know. Students from all over the world."

James hadn't thought his heart could sink any further, but obviously he was wrong. And he'd thought the point of this trip was that the best and brightest from three continents would get together to exchange ideas and learn from each other. The flight attendant walked past with the food trolley and he casually tossed the dream catcher into the garbage compartment. Well, so much for that idea.

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The farmland of Philadelphia was flicking past in Louise's peripheral vision like the background in a top-of-the-range racing game as she gunned the bike into top gear and took a ninety degree curve at a forty-five degree angle. It was all, she couldn't help thinking, a little bit hokey. The early summer fields were like a patchwork quilt sown by one of the Amish whose washing she could see on a line in front of a house up ahead. There were three pairs of black pants, three white shirts and three black jackets, from little to big, flapping in the breeze like Goldilocks's washing.

A second later and they were out of sight. Louise was doing eighty now, well above the limit, but she hadn't seen any state troopers for a while and she doubted the Amish would phone and complain. Besides, she had to pick up the pace, or she'd lose the race and losing wasn't in her vocabulary.

Her brother had been visibly ahead of her a few miles back, but however fast she went now she couldn't seem to catch up with him. She suspected that he'd found some backwoods short cut and snuck into it while he was out of sight. She couldn't believe they'd raced all the way here from SoCal neck-and-neck only for him to take the lead in the home stretch. He'd be unbearable for the whole trip if he beat her.

The engine between her thighs was humming pleasantly, comfortable with the pace she was setting, and she could smell the oily exhaust that always made her pulse race faster. Any faster and the bike might not be so happy. Still—caution was for losers.

Grinning into the wind that flattened her lips against her teeth, she put the pedal to the metal, accelerating hard into the next bend—

—then braking just as hard as she saw the Amish cart blocking the road ahead of her. But she already knew it was too late. Stopping distance at this speed had to be a good hundred yards and the cart was barely twenty ahead of her.

The bike veered and skidded, like a wild horse trying to shake a new rider. But she was wise to its ways and clung on. She let out a whoop of exhilaration. This was what it was all about.

There was a ditch paralleling the road, but it only looked to be five feet wide and she reckoned she could take it. She pulled the handlebars hard to the side before the bike lost too much speed, sped straight at the curb—then launched herself into the air at the very last possible moment, jerking the front wheel up as she did.

It barely lifted. The bike was a thousand cc, far too heavy for a small girl like her, Danny always said, but she always told him she could handle it and she proved herself right when the front wheel came down clear of the ditch in the cornfield on the other side. The back wheels didn't do so well, landing in the hollow of the ditch two feet below the field. For a horrible moment she could feel the bike dragging backwards into the ground, but the forward momentum was just enough and after a second the back wheel cleared the ditch and the bike slid to a halt, cutting a wide swathe through the head-high corn.

She took a moment to enjoy the move, gasping for breath and laughing at the same time with sheer exhilaration. Shit, why couldn't Danny have seen that?

After a moment, though, she realized that the Amish in the cart had stopped to stare at her stunt and were now pointing at her with expressions of Biblical disapproval. It occurred to her that it might actually be their field of corn she'd just cut a new road through. Oh well—better that than cutting a path through them and their little

tinker-toy cart. Still, they looked pissed off, and while she'd heard they were into non-violence and all that crap everyone had their breaking point.

Grinning, she blew them a little kiss, throttled the bike, let the wheel churn a groove in the mud of the field, then accelerated forward so hard she could feel the Gs. She leapt back over the ditch behind the cart with no difficulty at all this time.

Half an hour later and a good forty miles between her and the Amish, she was confident they hadn't set the police on her. She was also certain that Danny had got away. She'd made the best possible time to this point and hadn't seen so much as a glimpse of him. She'd even stopped to ask a man at a roadside stall selling vegetables if he'd seen another motorcyclist going by, and he'd said no.

Well, she needed a pit stop anyway, so she swerved into the forecourt of the next garage she saw. This being the boondocks, there was an actual man to fill her up with gas, a gap-toothed yokel type with mean, squinty eyes, so she left him to it and went to take the kind of epic piss you can only manage after seven hours of holding it in on a bike.

While she was on the can she dug out her cell and flicked through numbers till she found the GPS positioning service she and Danny had signed up to after they'd gone climbing in the Appalachians that one time and taken a wrong turn and nearly ended up getting in a "squeal-like-a-piggy" situation with some locals.

After a second, a bored-sounding woman told her that the precise coordinates of the phone she was on.

Louise schooled her voice to sound hesitant and slightly nervous. "Yeah, thanks, but actually it was another phone I needed to know about."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the woman said. "We're not allowed to release information on other users."

"But it's my brother, my twin brother," Louise said. She reeled off the number from memory. "You can check your database if you like, we've got the same surname. It's just, we've been traveling cross-country on our bikes. You know, doing the coast-to-coast thing. Only we got separated this morning and he's not answering his phone."

"Well..." the woman said, but Louise could tell she was softening.

She made her voice even more desperate. "Please, I'm really worried about him. Mom and dad would never forgive me if something... if something happened..." her voice trailed off on a theatrical sob that she'd had long years of parent-blackmail to perfect.

It worked. The woman gave her the coordinates and also offered to call the police and ambulance for her. Trying not to laugh, Louise told her that wouldn't be necessary.

Outside, under the red light of the setting sun, she took a look at the map. As soon as she did, she could see what Danny had done. He must have cut cross-country to take a bridge a few miles west of the one she'd used. It led to a far straighter road towards the interstate and he must have managed to cut a good thirty miles off the journey. But, she realized, looking at the map, that meant he'd now be committed to the interstate, and what he obviously didn't know but she did, having checked the traffic news the same time she'd checked the GPS service, was that there was a huge pile-up on the Philadelphia/New York border. Danny was likely to be tied up in traffic for hours.

Smiling, she headed back outside. The yokel had clearly grown bored of waiting for her and was squatting on his haunches beside the bike, examining the engine. "Big thing for a little girl," he said when he saw her approach.

She smiled, flirting a little. "I know how to stay on top."

He grinned back, revealing more of his crooked teeth than she really wanted to see. "I bet you do, sweetheart."

"And I like the feel of a big machine throbbing between my legs, know what I mean?"

By this point, he was virtually drooling. Didn't matter that he was about three times her age. The age of consent was probably twelve round these parts anyway. "There a particular machine you got in mind?" he asked.

"Oh, there's only one machine that does it for me," she said. Then she jumped on the bike and motored off. It was only when she heard

infuriated shouting behind her that she knew he'd realized she never paid for the gas.

\*\*\*

The ugly sprawl of Newark was fading behind him and for the first time Danny got a good look at the Manhattan skyline. He'd seen it a thousand times in films, but nothing had prepared him for the impact of the real thing, the art-deco towers smashing up into the sky like latter-day Towers of Babel. What struck him was not how modern it looked, but how wonderfully old, like a retro vision of the future.

New York, New York, Danny thought, so good they named it twice. A hundred other clichés sprung to mind but it didn't matter because this was a city that actually lived up to them all. A Californian boy through and through, he'd traveled to Europe with his parents but never to the East Coast. He'd always assumed he'd find it dull after the wide open spaces and rugged coast of his home. Idiot. Well, he'd have plenty of time to get bored of the place now. When the vacation was over Louise would be going back home, but he was here to stay, a freshman at NYU.

Thinking about Louise, he grinned. Boy would she be pissed that he'd beaten her here. He'd thought their race was just a bit of fun, but he knew that his sister really, really wanted to win. Came of being the youngest, he guessed, even if it was only by four hours.

The George Washington Bridge loomed in front of him now. As he swerved the bike through the junction and into the middle lane he felt a visceral thrill of excitement. The struts of the bridge flicked by epileptically, allowing him little glimpses of the murky waters of the Hudson River below. Then he was over and heading towards Midtown, where their budget hotel was located.

And, finally, there it was, the Murray Hill Hostel—looking like nothing special, a little brick place pressed back from the sidewalk by the maple planted in front of it.

And there, also, was Louise's bike. Damn—how had she done that? As he brought his own bike to a halt on the curb, his sister poked a

grinning head out of the door, then sauntered out to join him. "Took your time," she said.

He ruffled her hair in the way that he knew annoyed the hell out of her. "Thought I'd better let you win or you'd be grouchy for the whole vacation."

She knocked his hand away irritably. "Yeah, right. I beat you fair and square, admit it. Which means beer's on you for the duration."

Danny laughed. "Whatever you say, Lou."

Louise lowered her voice. "So, wanna come in and meet the international gimp squad?"

Danny frowned. "That bad, are they?"

Louise held the door open for him. "See for yourself."

Inside the small lobby was a cram of suitcases and bodies. The one who immediately stood out was a round-faced woman in her seventies who smiled as soon as she saw him and approached, hand extended. "Danny, right?"

He shook hands with her, surprised by the firmness of the grip from such a frail-seeming body. "Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Mary-Beth," she said. "I'm here representing Youth Across Continents and I'll be looking after y'all for the week." Her accent was warm and southern, like being wrapped in cotton wool while being spoon-fed biscuits and gravy. "This here's Bodil Raden, who's visiting us from Denmark."

Bodil looked, Danny thought, utterly wasted. Maybe it was just the jetlag, but there was a redness to her eyes that suggested the problem was self-inflicted. Her handshake was limp and damp. "Pleased to meet you," she said in an accent so like the Swedish chef out of *The Muppets* that he had to stifle a laugh.

"Then we've got Peter Hoffman, from Germany."

Peter was a thin-faced, rather serious-looking boy whose mousy hair was shaved into a military buzz-cut that didn't suit his gentle features.

"Over here's Rinoka Aratsu."

Rinoka was Japanese, her straight dark hair held up in two floral bunches at the sides of her face. Her powder blue T-shirt was decorated with a cartoon anteater and clashed horribly with both her

brown and red striped skirt and her knee-length suede boots. The whole ensemble was, Danny guessed, cutting-edge fashion back in Tokyo.

"And finally here's James Barker, all the way over the pond from England."

James was a square-faced boy who Danny guessed was mixed race from his coffee-colored skin and frizzy black hair. He didn't smile as he shook Danny's hand, firmly but for as short a time as could possibly be polite. "Pleased to meet you," he said. Danny was surprised to hear that his voice was very upper crust, like the sort of Brits he saw on *Masterpiece Theatre* when his parents insisted on watching it.

"So," Mary-Beth said, "we're all here now. Are we looking forward to the next week?"

It was the kind of question that required a "yes" answer. But, looking round at the motley crew gathered in the hotel lobby, Danny wasn't so sure.

\*\*\*

Kate had passed the faded hotel a thousand times in her journeys to and from the hospital and never so much as glanced at it. But now as she walked underneath the cracked sign for the Murray Hill Hostel, swaying and creaking in a light breeze, she felt an unexpected jab of apprehension and her steps slowed then stopped outside the hotel's bare brick front.

It's what happened earlier, she told herself, that horrible vision with the taxi driver which she had already half convinced herself was just an extreme form of *déjà vu*. Except this feeling was stronger, more urgent, as if whatever she sensed was going to affect her too, personally and deeply.

She found herself peering in through the big glass windows of the hotel lobby, pressing her nose up against the cold glass. But the sun was setting behind her and the light reflected from the window dazzled her so that she could barely make out the human figures

inside. All she could see were their silhouettes, insubstantial as ghosts, outlined in the red, demonic light of the falling sun.

Shivering suddenly, she hurried away from the hotel as fast as she could.



# TWO

By the next day, Kate had pulled herself together a little. For the first time she had had a full night's sleep without a hint of a nightmare. Even the clanging of the construction workers down the street didn't disturb her. She woke at eight feeling refreshed to see the sun shining brightly through the slits in the linen blinds, and when Brad rolled over and kissed her with musty morning breath, she responded in kind rather than pushing him away as she had done the last week.

She felt Brad's excitement hardening him through the thin material of his boxers. He rolled her over so she was lying fully on her back and positioned himself on top of her, his weight pushing her into the mattress in a way she'd always found comforting.

"Well, good morning," he said, smiling the broad, confident smile which had attracted her to him in the first place back when they'd been freshmen together at Columbia. His fingers inched under her tank T, working it slowly up her stomach. The gentle stroking tickled a little and she squirmed and laughed. He grinned and poked her deliberately in the side where he knew she was most sensitive. She jumped and squealed and he used the opportunity to get the top all the way off, coaxing her arms up so he could pull it over her head.

She enjoyed the way his eyes traveled over her body, still aroused by the sight after five years together.

"There's no look but don't touch policy here, you know," she told him, pulling his head down for a deep kiss.

His tongue exerted its authority, thrusting into the back of her mouth in a way she'd never enjoyed very much but hadn't had the heart to tell him. When he'd had enough of that he pulled back to look at her again. "You're beautiful, babe."

She smiled, letting her fingers drift down inside his boxers. "It's okay, you don't need to sweet-talk me. I'm a sure thing."

As she began working her fingers up and down him, he groaned and collapsed backwards, flinging his arms above his head in a

gesture that made him look briefly like a Victorian virgin about to be deflowered by some bearded cad.

She understood the invitation though and rose to her knees to supplement her hand with her mouth. He let out a low moan and his hips began moving up and down in time with her movements. She sucked a little harder, enjoying this power over him.

After a few more seconds of this he abruptly sat up and—far less gently than before—pushed her down into the covers, holding her hands above her head with one arm while the other explored below.

"Ready?" he asked, the tension of holding back evident in his voice.

"Mm-hmm," she mumbled, putting her own hand down to guide him inside. There was a slight discomfort as he entered her and he began pumping in and out sooner than she would have liked, but it had been more than a week and she knew he didn't like to jerk off because he thought it was somehow disrespectful to her.

Still, very soon the ache turned to a chafing sort of pleasure and she let out a series of small moans of her own.

She opened her eyes to look at Brad, intending to tell him that she loved him—

—and saw staring back at her the milky, blank orbs of a weeks-old corpse.

Frozen in horror, she watched him smile down at her, the movement stretching the parchment skin of his cheeks so that it thinned and then tore, revealing the pus-green flesh beneath barely covering the white hinge of his jaw.

She screamed and pushed him off her. Taken by surprise, he rolled all the way off the bed and onto the floor.

"What the hell...?" Brad shouted, scrambling to his feet. His eyes, now their normal deep brown, glared at her furiously.

He looked totally normal. He was totally normal. There was nothing going on except in her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she said. But she knew from Brad's expression that the damage had already been done.

They dressed in silence and Brad still hadn't said two words to her by the time she got in to the hospital. She was on an anesthetics

elective taught by Dr Wantman, one of the younger and better-looking residents and usually someone whose classes she enjoyed. But this morning she couldn't focus at all, her mind sliding off the sterile white and silver surfaces of the ward to endlessly replay the earlier events.

Was she going mad? Was that it? She knew all about hallucinations, how real they felt to those who were having them. Maybe she should see someone, even talk to someone at the hospital, get herself checked out. But she knew that, however nice and understanding they might be at the time, it would be the kiss of death for her career. How could they leave her in charge of patients, leave patients' lives in her hands, if she could barely manage her own? She would see herself sidelined, not invited to apply for a residency, not getting the sort of recommendation that would secure her a residency anywhere else, and that would be the end of her future in medicine.

No, she couldn't do it. And she wasn't going mad, damn it. She knew the hallucinations for what they were, wasn't taken in by them like the truly insane were. It was just post-traumatic stress disorder, a reaction to the stupid, stupid events of last week. She had to be strong, to keep her cool and not show anyone else what she was feeling. And in a few days, or at most weeks, it would all be over and she and Brad would be able to look back at it and laugh.

"So, Kate," Dr Wantman's voice suddenly registered through her haze of self-doubt, "what would you recommend in this case?"

She studied the patient, a young boy barely into his teens, and dredged up from her memory the fact that he was suffering from leukemia and due to have a stem cell transplant later that day. "We need to run his blood work, biochemistry and hematology," she told him, careful to keep her voice crisp and professional.

Dr Wantman smiled at her, the smile that had charmed many a nurse into his bed. "That's exactly right."

Kate smiled back, and tried to ignore the fact that on the bed she could see the shape of the skull shining white beneath the boy's young, frightened face.

\*\*\*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Peter decided, was the most wonderful place he'd ever seen. Mary-Beth had given them a map and a suggested route, but Peter had abandoned it immediately, preferring to lose himself in the great marble maze of the place and enjoy being surprised by the things he came across.

The latest was a row of Tiffany stained glass windows. Peter thought there was something incredibly happy about them. One in particular fascinated him. It was a view over a waterfall, sparking a crystalline blue and lined with emerald green trees.

"Shit, isn't it?" said a voice from beside him. His heart sank as he realized it was Rinoka, the strange Japanese girl who dressed as if she lived in some alternative universe where colors like orange and red went really well together.

"Actually, I think it's beautiful," Peter said.

"Really?" Rinoka sounded astounded. She studied the glass window, squinting her eyes and pressing her face so close to it that her hair brushed against the frame. Peter winced and glanced round nervously to see if any of the security guards were watching them.

"No, it's definitely shit," she said eventually.

"Well, you're entitled to your opinion, of course, " Peter said diplomatically.

Rinoka turned to look at him, her eyes as bright and flat as a bird's. "Don't you want to argue with me?"

Peter shook his head, baffled. "No, I don't like arguments."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. Then she smiled at him and took his hand. "Well, come on then, show me something else you think is good so I can also give you my opinion of that." She began to drag him out of the room. Peter flushed, though he didn't resist, more worried about giving offence by pulling away than embarrassed to be holding hands with this girl he hardly knew.

But his eyes lingered on the stained glass, drinking in the peaceful view. It made him suddenly fiercely homesick for the rolling green mountains and woodlands of Bavaria. For some reason, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd never see them again.

\*\*\*

Mary-Beth was seriously worried about the Danish girl, Bodil. She looked half-conscious most of the time, and she was barely able to string a coherent sentence together. If it went on much longer, MaryBeth had decided she would have to take her to a hospital.

The girl turned bloodshot, hazy eyes on her now. "Where is it that we are?"

"The Metropolitan Museum of Art," Mary-Beth explained patiently.

"Oh." Bodil's gaze wandered to the walls. She stopped suddenly, and for a moment Mary-Beth thought that something was wrong. But she had just paused to stare at one of the paintings, a strange primitive picture of a man etched out of thick brown paint.

"Dubuffet," Bodil said.

"I beg your pardon, honey?" Bodil was wobbling slightly from side to side as she looked at the painting and Mary-Beth gently put a hand under her elbow to steady her.

The Danish girl turned to look at her, her expression a lot more awake, almost animated. "It's Jean Dubuffet, a French artist. Surrealist. He's considered a master of primitive surrealism."

"Really?" Mary-Beth examined the painting again. Now that she took the time, she could see that it had a certain raw power, as if it was urgently trying to tell her something, but she couldn't quite figure out what. "You like art?"

Bodil shrugged, and wobbled away from the painting. "My parents collect it."

"That's nice."

But Bodil shook her head. "They're not interested in it. They think it's a good investment."

"Well, that's a shame," Mary-Beth said, shaking her head. "Those things were made to be appreciated, not hoarded away."

For the first time, Bodil smiled. The expression lightened her whole face so that it was suddenly clear how very young she was, untouched by most of the awful things the world would throw at an

average person over the course of their life. "Yes, yes, that's what I tell them. But they just call me a fucking hippy."

Mary-Beth's mouth pursed. "I know things are different in your country, but I'd ask you not to use that sort of language while you're here."

Bodil's smile widened. "It's okay. Hippy isn't a dirty word."

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"So, it rains like all the time, right?" Louise said, in that loose-limbed Californian drawl that James had always found intensely irritating.

He sighed. "No, it rains a fair amount, but no more than Seattle for example. England has a climate moderated by the Gulf Stream which means that it's temperate despite its relatively high latitude."

Louise yawned. "Yeah. Whatever. I guess your bowler hats keep the water off anyway."

James didn't bother to reply to that one; he suspected that Louise was just trying to tease him. Her slightly sharp face was set in the stiff expression of someone making an active effort not to laugh. She had, he decided, got the raw end of the looks deal between her and her twin brother. They both had the same thick sandy hair, but his was spiked up into an energetic halo while hers hung limply round her face. And while Danny's unusually light brown, almost golden eyes had a striking effect, on her they looked a little crazy, as if she wasn't entirely in control of herself.

"So, what do you think of the good old U S of A?" she asked after a moment when it was clear her previous comment had failed to get a rise out of him. "Must be nice not to have to eat fish and chips for a change." Her voice, which she was making no effort to hush, echoed round the vaulted marble interior of the vast exhibition space they were in. He imagined for a moment that the elegant Greek and Roman statues scattered through the room would all turn and glare disapprovingly at them.

Unfortunately they didn't, and he realized that ignoring her wasn't going to make her go away. He rolled his eyes and turned to face her.

"Actually, I know America quite well. I lived here for a few years when I was younger."

"Really?" Louise sounded genuinely interested for the first time. "You must have fitted right in."

James shrugged. "People don't drop out to fit in."

Louise frowned, puzzled.

"We lived in the desert with a Native American shaman," he explained.

Louise studied him, trying to see the joke. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," James said wearily. "My parents are, well, hippies. I spent my first twelve years traveling between ashrams in India, Tibetan monasteries and a commune in Wales."

Her eyes flicked over him. "And you're biracial, right?"

"Mixed race, yeah," James said. "My mum's Welsh and my dad's half Chinese, half Creole from Reunion Island. They met when they were both arrested campaigning for nuclear disarmament at Greenham Common."

Louise shook her head, looking at him admiringly. "You have had one truly fucked-up life."

James smiled very slightly for the first time. "Tell me about it."

\*\*\*

Rinoka heaved an enormous sigh of relief when she finally managed to break free of Peter. Wow that boy was dull. No wonder Japan had lost the last war with people like that on their side. She had thought this vacation was going to be fun. It was in New York after all, party capital of the world, or so the Americans were always saying. The solution, she realized, was to talk to an actual American, who might know where to go in this town to have a good time. And there was one right now—Danny, the better-looking one of the two twins.

"Hey, Danny! Danny!" she shouted out.

All around her, people stared and tutted. But when Danny approached her he was laughing.

"Don't you have museums in your country?" he asked.

"Sure we have them," she said. "But I never go there. Why is it when people go somewhere in a plane they start doing things they'd never do back home?"

"What would you normally do back home?"

Rinoka mimed a few dance moves. "Party. Dance. Drink."

Danny shook his head. It occurred to her that with his big, strange pale eyes and shock of spiky hair, he could have been a manga hero. Even his body language was right: always active, bent at a sharp angle when he moved as if some engineer had streamlined him for maximum visual impact before letting him out of the factory. "No drinking," he said.

Rinoka's eyes widened. "What? But it said nothing about that in the information for the trip."

He shrugged. "Didn't need to. Drinking age in this country is twenty-one."

Rinoka was horrified. "And you call yourself civilized."

But Danny was smiling, a crooked, wily smile that suddenly made him look much more like a manga villain. "Of course, if we had some fake ID, we could get served no problem."

"So where do we get fake ID? How much do they cost?" Rinoka asked.

Danny pulled out a small wad of plastic documents and fanned them out in front of her. "To you, fifty bucks."

\*\*\*

Kate kept to her resolution all through lunch in the MacDonald's that had opened in the hospital two years ago (to the disgust of the cardiology department and the secret delight of the many of the junior staff). Brad had got caught up observing a major bypass operation so he wasn't around to join her. She was glad. It was easier to hide what she was feeling from someone who didn't know her so well. It was particularly easy to hide it from Saul, the fellow med student who'd joined her at the meal without asking and who never seemed to pay a blind bit of attention to anything that didn't advance either his career prospects or his prospects of getting laid.



Unfortunately, when they'd first met he'd decided that she was one of the latter and no amount of subtle hints, pointed remarks or plain rudeness from her managed to put him off. He just seemed to regard the presence of Brad as an added challenge.

His square, blond jock head and smooth preppy face leaned in, invading her personal space. "Hey Katie." He was the only one who ever called her that. "Did you hear what went down with Wantman earlier?"

"No," Kate said wearily, though she was sure whatever it was would cast Saul in a good light and anyone else involved in a bad one.

"Seems like someone's been Sux racing."

He paused, clearly expecting a reaction to this momentous news. Kate felt an icy chill crawl down her spine and her Big Mac suddenly felt like a heavy, indigestible lump in her stomach. "Sux racing?" she said carefully, sure that he would be able to hear the tremor in her voice.

He laughed patronizingly. "Jesus, Katie, you'd think you were raised in the Appalachians not Chicago for the amount you know about the world. You know, Sux racing, injecting yourself with Sux then seeing how far you can run before the stuff kicks in."

"Really?" Kate said. "Sounds like a dumb idea."

"It's a career-endingly dumb idea, which is why there might be a few more vacancies round here come fall. Apparently, Wantman found out that some Sux was missing from stores and not being dumb himself he knows why, and now he's on the warpath to find the culprits."

"Well, good luck to him," Kate said in what she hoped was a conversation-over kind of way.

But Saul just leaned back, folded his arms and stared at her. "Come on, aren't you interested in who it was?" He seemed to get a sudden idea and leaned forward to stare at her intently. "Hey, it wasn't you, was it?" He grinned. "Have you been playing with the bad kids, Katie?"

Kate felt all the moisture drain out of her mouth till she wasn't sure she could unstick her tongue from the roof to move it. "Of

course not," she finally said, trying to inject a note of indignation rather than fear into the words.

Saul just laughed and slapped her on the arm. "I'm just shitting you, Shelley. The day you do something as stupid as that is the day hell freezes over. So, what are you doing tonight?" he continued with a change of gear into sleazy which would have been impressive if it wasn't so annoying.

Kate could feel her pulse returning to normal, but it didn't alter the fact that Dr Wantman knew about the race. Saul might not believe it, but there was a very good chance she was going to get caught. "I'm spending the evening with Brad," she said.

Saul grimaced. "That loser. Katie, Katie, Katie, you can do so much better."

She felt a rising anger, and welcomed it. It was preferable to the cold, clammy fear. "He's my boyfriend, Saul. And he doesn't like me spending too much time with other guys." She rose and headed for the exit.

Saul shook his head. "No wonder he moved out of Maine. He must have been close to deforesting the place just to keep all those sticks up his ass."

\*\*\*

"Okay, folks," Mary-Beth said to the group gathered in the hotel lobby. They looked up at her with exhausted eyes, Funny how youngsters could run around causing mischief till the cows came home but put them anywhere near a work of art and it just drained the energy right out of them. "I'll give you an hour to freshen up, then we'll all go out and find ourselves a nice meal in Chinatown. How does that sound?"

"Lovely, thank you," Peter said immediately.

Now there was a polite boy, Mary-Beth thought, but a very unhappy one too, not far underneath it.

"Chinese food?" Rinoka wrinkled her nose. "Is that necessary?"

"Do you good to try something new," Mary-Beth said briskly. "Go along now, time's short." And she shooed the kids upstairs, making

sure none of them tried to slip past her while she wasn't looking. "I'll wait for you down here," she finished. She saw several of their faces visibly drop. No doubt they thought they were adults now, chafed at these restrictions placed on them. Well, there was time enough to be a grown-up, years of it. She knew from bitter experience that you had to enjoy being a child while you could.

Her eye caught a little model on the reception desk of the hotel, a plastic skeleton dressed up in top hat and tails. A Day of the Dead decoration left over from years past, she guessed. It was only a toy, but she felt a sliver of fear pass through her as she registered what it was.

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"This sucks," Louise said to Danny, shutting the door of their dingy, slightly damp-smelling room. The carpet beneath the small, stained sink was spongy, as if years of water and worse had dripped onto it and never been cleaned up.

"Quit bitching." Danny slipped off his Lakers T-shirt, wiping it over his body before throwing it on the floor somewhere in the vicinity of his suitcase. He couldn't believe the humidity. LA was hot but it was nothing like this. "Least we get a free meal out of it."

"You've got to be kidding! No way am I getting stuck with those losers for the rest of the evening," his sister said.

He turned to look at her. She had that frown, the two perfectly even lines above her nose that told him she was in one of those moods, the dangerous ones where anything could happen but probably not anything good.

"Mary-Beth's waiting right down in the lobby," Danny said. "And we're on the fourth floor. What do you wanna do, jump?"

"No, asshole. I want to go down to the second floor—then jump."

Danny thought it over, but not for very long. Louise might be crazy, but she knew how to find a good time, and he wasn't too excited at the prospect of a quiet meal in Chinatown either. "All right," he said, "but the dorks are coming too."

Louise's frown deepened. "No way!"

Danny stood his ground. He knew which battles to cede to his sister and which ones he could win. "Look, if it's just the two of us they can send us back home. But they can't throw us all off the trip or there'd be no trip left."

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"No way," James said. He eyed Danny with incredulity and contempt.

Danny grinned at him. "It'll be fun."

James's mouth thinned, a mulish expression on his square face. "Define fun."

Behind James, Danny saw Peter and Rinoka watching the exchange with interest. Bodil was still in a world of her own; he'd had to virtually push her out of the room she'd seemed so out of it.

Danny scrubbed a hand back through his sandy hair. "Well it isn't sitting around Chinatown under the watchful eye of Miss Daisy. Or are you Brits really as tight-assed as everyone says?"

James scowled at him. "I could drink you under the table."

"Yeah? Prove it."

Danny could see James knew that Danny was manipulating him, but that he couldn't quite bring himself to turn down the dare. "Fine," James said. "But when we get into trouble I'm telling MaryBeth it was your idea."

"Be my guest," Danny said. He turned to Peter, the only other potential problem as far as he could figure. "How about you?"

"Well," Peter said hesitantly. "I would like to see more of the, err, night life of New York while I'm here."

Louise whooped and put her arms around him, which Danny could see made Peter very uncomfortable. "Way to go, Petie. Anyway, Chinese food sucks—no offense, Rinoka."

"I'm Japanese!" Rinoka said, looking mortally wounded.

Louise shrugged. "Yeah, whatever." She began to hustle the others impatiently down the stairs. "So, there's a fire escape round the back that leads down to an alley at the side. We'll get out no problem."

No problem, Peter thought, was a slight exaggeration. There was indeed a fire escape, but it was on the building opposite. Their building merely had a small metal platform outside each window. Peter suspected that there had once been some kind of bridge to connect the two buildings together, but it had long since rusted away. The whole alley—a narrow, dank space at the rear of the hotel—looked like an illustration of urban decay. It seemed, Peter thought, strangely anachronistic in the premier city of the world's most powerful nation. But then he'd noticed many such sights in his brief time here, like the steam that rose out of grates in the sidewalks and the old-fashioned lettering of the shop names. New York was a curious mixture of the out-of-date and the hyper-modern.

His attention snapped back to the present as Louise jumped across the three-foot gap between the buildings with almost arrogant ease. She landed clatteringly on the rusted iron of the platform opposite then turned round to grin at the others. "So, what are you waiting for?"

Bodil, the pretty Danish girl, was next. She drifted up to the edge of the platform, eyes seeming to look into some universe other than the one she was in. Peter had feared right from the first meeting that there was something terribly wrong with her, but for some reason either no one else had noticed it or they weren't at all worried about it. What did Peter know about girls—or Danes—anyway? Maybe she was smiling so dreamily because she was stopping to admire the view.

Except, he suddenly realized, she wasn't stopping. Her foot extended out over the twenty-foot drop below and in a second he could see that she'd lean forward and plummet to the concrete below.

Letting out a cry of fear, Peter elbowed Rinoka out of the way and reached out towards Bodil. She startled at the sound of his voice, seeming to snap out of her trance. But her instinctive reaction was to back away—into the void.

As he watched, horrified, she seemed to hang suspended in the air for a minute, like Wile E Coyote in those old *Roadrunner* cartoons. Then her own face twisted in horror and she began to fall. Desperate, he fell to his knees on the edge of the platform and flung out his arm

towards her. Her fingers brushed against his and clasped briefly, but her momentum was already too great and they slipped out of his grasp. She let out a frantic cry as she fell.

Peter felt the others cluster around him, staring down stunned at the ground below where Bodil's body lay ominously still.

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Brad and Kate shared a class together in the afternoon, an anesthesiology lecture that had the appropriate effect of sending half the attendees to sleep. Kate tried to pay attention, she really did. But all she could think about was what Saul had told her, that Dr Wantman knew about the Sux racing. And when she managed to get her mind off that it was filled with the images of death that had been tormenting her all day.

After a while, Brad picked up on her mood with that instinct for each other's emotions that couples seem to develop. He leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Babe, I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier. I know it's been a tough week for you."

If he'd been cold, as he'd been earlier, she thought she could have stood it. But it was his gentleness that undid her. To her shame she felt hot tears begin to spill out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

Brad saw them too. "Shit, Kate, are you okay?"

She shook her head, but couldn't trust herself to speak without sobbing out loud. Already a few people in the row in front had turned around to look at them and then turned back quickly again, embarrassed by her obvious distress.

Brad took one look at them, then grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the lecture. "What is it? Has something else happened?" Brad asked as soon as they were outside. He pulled her down to sit on one of the flat wooden benches that lined the wall outside the lecture theatre.

Kate tried to reply but all that came out were great gulping sobs. Brad felt lost for a moment, then he put his arms around her and held her tight. The sobs wracked her body for a good few minutes, allowing no room for speech and barely any for thought. But Kate

found that when they were over she felt calm, as if something else had been purged from her body along with the tears.

She pulled away from Brad's arms far enough to be able to see his face. "I think I'm going mad," she said. Amazingly, saying the words, giving voice to her fears, made her feel even better. She'd lifted the weight off her own shoulders and given it to someone else.

Brad laughed. "Come on, because of a few nightmares?" Then he seemed to realize that this might seem a little callous and his face sobered. "Lack of sleep makes everyone screwy, Kate, you know that. And on top of the workload we get here and the... the shock you had last week, it's no wonder you're feeling shaky. You're not going mad, baby, believe me."

Kate wished she could, but she knew he didn't have all the facts. She hesitated a moment, then said, "It's not just the nightmares." She swallowed. "I've been having... hallucinations too."

She could see Brad's eyes become more guarded and the temporary lift in her spirits dissipated like mist in the wind. "When? What kind of hallucinations?"

Kate wished now she'd never started the conversation. "Yesterday and today," she told him. "It started with that accident earlier. Before the taxi driver, before he died, I saw him die. I saw him burn up."

Kate saw a flicker of alarm behind the careful shield of Brad's eyes. "You're saying you're having premonitions?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." She could feel her voice getting shaky again and she paused a minute to get herself back under control. "It happened this morning when we were... I saw you and you were dead. And then this afternoon, we were treating this little kid and suddenly I could see his skeleton as if all his flesh had just melted away."

Brad nodded, going into doctor mode, treating her like a patient rather than a girlfriend. "And did anything happen to the boy that you know of? Did he actually die?"

"No, not that I've heard." She felt washed out suddenly, drained of all emotion.

"And I don't seem to be dead either, do I?"

A ghost of a smile appeared on Kate's lips. "Not as far as I can tell."

"So apart from the taxi driver, none of your 'visions' have actually predicted anything."

She knew Brad was trying and she could follow the logic of his reasoning but she couldn't help feeling like he was missing something vital. "No, I guess not. But there was the taxi driver."

Brad stood up, decisively. She could see that he'd made up his mind that she wasn't mad and had found some way to rationalize it. "I saw the state you were in yesterday, Kate, you were totally out of it. You're probably just not remembering things clearly. I bet you looked at the taxi driver when he was on fire, even though I told you not to and it upset you so much that you came up with this idea that you'd seen it already. But you hadn't. Your sense of time is all over the place from worry and lack of sleep."

He took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "What you have to do is get some sleep—get a prescription if you need to—and stop worrying about this. I know you, you'll be going over and over this so much that you won't know up from down after a while. Just relax, think about something else and soon enough you'll stop having these morbid fantasies altogether."

Kate looked at him a moment, then put her arms around him and hugged him hard. "Yes, yes you're right," she said. "I'm just being stupid."

She knew it was what he wanted to hear. She just wasn't sure if she believed it herself.

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James was still shaking when they made it to the Lower East Side bar that Rinoka told them she'd read about on some internet group and was apparently the coolest place in town. He kept sneaking glances at Bodil, making sure she really was all right.

He kept flashing back to the events of an hour ago, the vision crystal clear in his mind's eye, sharper now than it had been at the time. Bodil falling down, her arm raised hopelessly towards Peter, trying to slow her fall. Thumping onto the ground with a bone-jarring impact. Lying still. Horribly, horribly still. He could feel the



adrenaline that had coursed through his veins gradually draining away and could finally admit that mixed in with the horror had been a certain excitement. The primitive part of him that he tried to distance himself from as much as possible had enjoyed the buzz of action. His parents would probably tell him it was perfectly healthy.

Anyway, it didn't matter because after only a few seconds Bodil had risen to her feet, wobbling if anything less than she had before. "I really should look where I'm going," she'd said.

James had been convinced that she must have done herself some damage and been too hurt to realize it. He'd insisted that she let him check her out, feeling for bruises and looking for any sign of concussion like slurred speech or mismatched pupils—and he'd found absolutely nothing. Well, he supposed, it wasn't that long a drop. And they did say you did less harm if you were relaxed, which Bodil certainly had been.

He looked over at her now, where she was sharing a beer and a laugh with the Japanese girl Rinoka. If nothing else, the fall had jarred her out of her previous daze. She was suddenly the most animate member of the party, full of jokes and teasing. Her blonde curls were bouncing around now as she threw back her head in the sort of full-throated, uninhibited laugh of which James had never been capable.

"Like what you see?" Danny asked as he sauntered over with two beer bottles clasped in each hand. The bar was absolutely packed, the rumble of conversation vying with the hard rock blaring over the sound system for dominance. The music suited the ill-clothed, unshaven crowd. Clearly Rinoka's idea of "cool" was borderline criminal.

James continued to stare at Bodil. "I just can't believe she's okay," he said.

"Obviously being baked out of your fucking mind has some advantages." Danny handed two of the beer bottles to James. "Bottoms up, old chap."

James rolled his eyes but didn't say anything. He'd got used to many Americans' curious view of the British during his childhood here and besides he suspected that Danny was just teasing him, his

strange pale eyes shimmering with laughter. "Cheers," James said, then lifted the first bottle to his lips and drained it in several long gulps. It was Becks, colder and blander than the bitter he usually preferred, but after the earlier events he needed a drink.

When he put the bottle down, he saw that Danny was staring at him in admiration. "You weren't kidding about drinking me under the table."

James put the bottle neatly on the table behind him, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped round the rim of the second bottle where he'd noticed a greasy fingerprint before making a start on it. "Booze is part of British culture. We've always been a notorious nation of alcoholics. Did you know, in the eighteenth century every sixth house in London was a gin house? The navy grog ration was a pint of rum and a gallon of beer a day."

He realized that Danny was shaking his head at him. "You know some weird shit."

James half-smiled back at him. "I bet we all do. Youth Across Continents must have had some reason for picking us."

Danny took a slug of his own drink. "Maybe they've got a sick sense of humor."

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Louise didn't know what to make of the club they went to next. It was huge and incredibly loud, every inch of it filled with people, and all of whom looked like they were strung out on something. The New York night was hot and humid enough without coming somewhere virtually glowing with all the accumulated body heat. And the music was that electro-techno shit that she'd never had any time for. Maybe the Europeans were more into it, though James looked liked he was in actual pain and Peter was clinging to the walls, darting looks to left and right like a nervous virgin at the prom. Louise grinned and went up to him.

"Hi there," she said.

"Oh, hello," Peter said. He looked straight ahead, not at her. His thin face was so delicate it was almost feminine and she thought that

she really never had met anyone so painfully shy.

"So, enjoying yourself?" she persevered.

Reluctantly, he turned to look at her. He had to steady himself against the wall with one hand as he did and she realized for the first time that he was quite drunk. "I shouldn't be here," he said, his slurred speech making his German accent stronger.

Louise shrugged. "None of us should be here. That's what makes it fun."

"My father warned me about this, about temptation..."

"Hey, 'I can resist anything except temptation,'" Louise joked.

Peter's soft brown eyes widened in surprise. "Oscar Wilde. I didn't think you'd know him."

"I've got hidden depths. Plus *Masterpiece Theatre* junkie parents."

"Oh." He brooded for a moment, his forehead creased in a frown. "Well, I've always been taught that you should resist temptation, that it's something God sends to test us."

"Bit of a bastard thing to do, isn't it?" James said, inserting himself between Peter and Louise. His dark curly hair, stiff with sweat, was standing out from his head at crazy angles.

"I beg your pardon?" Peter said. For the first time, he sounded a little dangerous. But James was on a belligerent booze kick of his own and didn't seem to care.

"God. Tempting us. I mean, why? So he can send us to hell if we give in? Why not just make us more resistant to temptation in the first place? Or better yet not send us any temptation at all. I mean, he's God isn't he? He can do what he likes, but for some reason he chooses to treat us like shit."

"I would prefer it," Peter said, "if you did not speak in this way." Louise could see that his hands were clenched into fists. The skin over his knuckles was tight white with tension.

James remained either oblivious or uncaring. "Why? Because it might force you to reconsider your strange attachment to the outdated and frankly absurd concept of a so-called 'supreme being?'" He pushed his square, blocky face right up to Peter's.

"Hey, calm down," Louise said, trying vainly to interpose herself between them. No wonder so many wars had been fought over

religion if it could get these two tight-asses worked up into this kind of state.

"Yes, Pete, calm down," James jeered. "We're only having a philosophical discussion after all."

"It's not philosophy to me," Peter said heatedly. His clenched fists were now raised to chest level. "You are insulting the foundations of my life. Just because you choose to live a godless and empty existence doesn't mean we all have to."

"My existence wasn't godless, you moron, James shouted back, losing his own patina of calm for the first time. "It was full of bloody gods. My parents change religion more often than most people change clothes. Pagan gods. Hindu gods, Native American gods. Even your sadistic little fuck of a deity—"

With his sixth sense for trouble, Danny spotted what was going on and hurried over—just in time to see Peter take a swing at James. James, who must have seen it coming too, ducked away from the blow. Which left Louise right in the path Peter's fist. She felt it connect with a meaty crunch that preceded the stab of eye-watering agony by about two seconds.

"You bastard!" she heard Danny shout. She raised her head, hand clutched over her bleeding nose, just in time to see Danny's own fist connect with Peter's stomach. Danny was no brawler but he was fit and fiercely protective of her. She saw Peter double over, choking and coughing.

By now, Bodil and Rinoka had also spotted what was going on. They tried to pull Danny away from Peter, but before they could get very far the bouncers turned up and threw them all out.

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They stood on the 76th Street pavement outside the club feeling slightly dazed. Danny kept trying to staunch the flow of blood from Louise's nose with his T-shirt, which he'd stripped off for the purpose, but she pushed his hand away impatiently. "It's fine," she said angrily, taking out her pain and embarrassment on him to have

been caught so flat-footed and by Peter of all people. "Noses always bleed a lot. It isn't serious."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Peter kept saying abjectly, but she ignored him too.

"Well," James said in that annoying upper class voice of his, "a salutary lesson on the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption."

Louise looked at him with distaste. "You were the one who started it all."

"Let's go to Coney Island," Rinoka said suddenly, the first words she'd spoken since they'd been thrown out.

Louise glared at her. "What?"

Rinoka just nodded, ponytails bobbing, seemingly incapable of reading a situation. "I've always wanted to go there. We can't go back in the club and the music in there was no good anyway, so let's go to Coney Island. The fairground should be fun!"

"It's the middle of the night," Danny said with heavy patience. "It'll be shut."

"So?" Rinoka said, shrugging. "That will be even more exciting. Spooky."

"I think it's a good idea," Bodil said unexpectedly. "Look," she continued when she saw them staring at her, "we're going to get in trouble as soon as we go back. Mary-Beth will probably never let us out of her sight again. So let's enjoy ourselves while we can."

"Great," Rinoka said. She put her arms around James and Peter. "Come on. Everyone should say sorry to everyone else and then we can get over this and get on with having fun."

"Yeah," Louise muttered, her hand clasped over her nose. "'Cause this evening's been a real bundle of laughs so far."

# THREE

Coney Island wasn't fun, it was creepy. The boardwalk stretched along the sand, glittering silver in the moonlight, but the whole place had a rundown and slightly menacing air. In the daylight it might have seemed quaint, even charming. But at four in the morning Danny thought it looked like a last resort, the place people ended up when they had nowhere else to go to.

What had seemed a reasonable idea at the time—or at least a good way to stop the entire group from beating the shit out of each other—had started to feel like a very bad one. The subway ride had been long enough to sober up and now they were here, the cool breeze coming in off the water injecting a slight chill into the air. Danny wished they'd just gone straight back to the hotel and faced the music.

"Isn't this great?" James said beside him.

Danny looked at the grin on the other guy's face, surprised. "It's okay, I guess."

"But it's so atmospheric," James said. "It looks like it hasn't changed since the nineteen-fifties. I feel like I'm in an episode of *Scooby Doo*."

Danny glanced round, and caught for the first time the dim outline of the fairground, a big roller coaster twisting through the sky, outlined against the moon like a dark rune. "Actually, yeah, it is pretty cool."

"There's the abandoned fairground," Rinoka said.

Louise frowned. "Abandoned?"

"It burned down," Rinoka said, "then they rebuilt it, then it burned down again, so they rebuilt it again. Eventually, they just gave up. How can you not have heard of it?"

"This isn't my home. Danny and me are from California."

"Which is approximately three thousand miles away from here," James said. "Still, you might at least have read a guidebook."

Louise scowled at him and Danny could tell that she hadn't forgiven him for getting her hit earlier.

"Let's take a look," Danny said, before James and Louise could start going at it again.

Danny led them along the shore, enjoying the feeling of the sand crunching under his tennis shoes and the faint salty smell of the water as it lapped against the shore. He noticed that Peter was hanging back at the rear of the group, deliberately isolating himself from the others and he slowed his own pace to match.

Peter continued to stare at the ground with an expression of fierce concentration.

"Hey there," Danny said eventually.

Peter looked up, then back down at the ground. "Oh, hi."

"I'm sorry I hit you earlier," Danny said.

"No, no," Peter said. "I deserved it. I hit your sister."

"But you didn't mean to—it was an accident."

"True." Peter's voice sounded thick with emotion. "But I meant to hit James."

"Well, I've only known James a day," Danny said, "but I'm pretty damn sure he deserved it."

"No one deserves to be the victim of violence. And I of all people should know that. My whole life my father has taught me: turn the other cheek, live your life as if Christ was beside you watching your every move. And then, as soon as I am away, as soon as I am faced with the slightest trial, I fail it completely."

There was a slight hitch in Peter's voice as he stopped talking and Danny was very much afraid that he was on the point of tears. He felt horribly awkward, unused to anyone confiding their feelings in him, let alone some German stranger he'd met less than twenty-four hours ago. "Oh. Well, you were drunk."

"And that makes it better?" Peter asked, looking Danny in the eye for the first time. His own were red-rimmed and haunted, filled with nighttime shadows.

Danny resisted the urge to make a joke. "You probably weren't used to drinking. And from what Lou said he was insulting your religion. Wouldn't God want you to stand up for him?"

Peter shook his head. "No."

Danny gave up. "Then just repent or whatever and let it go," he said, then picked up his pace to reach the front of the group as they turned away from the sea and headed towards the high fence surrounding the ruined funfair.

Up close, it didn't look so much like something from *Scooby Doo*, more a backdrop for some kind of post-apocalyptic nightmare movie. Even in the moonlight Danny could make out the twisted shape of the long-abandoned roller coaster, the rusted metal of its frame limned with rust. It was probably only his imagination, but Danny could swear he smelt smoldering timber in the air. Dimly over the gentle sloshing of the waves Danny could hear rustlings emerging from inside the derelict site, and though he knew it was probably the nighttime creatures that made their home there, he couldn't help imagining something more sinister, something that might leap out at them at any moment.

"Woo-woo!" Louise said loudly in his ear, and he jumped and then glared at her as she laughed at him.

"Pretty damn amazing, isn't it?" she said.

"I don't know. I don't think I like it." He couldn't tear his eyes away from the place. He wondered if anyone had died in the fire that consumed it, then realized that he didn't want to know.

"What's the matter, Danny?" Louise was staring at him with an expression he'd learnt to recognize since childhood, one that said she'd spotted a weakness and now intended to exploit it. "Not afraid of a little fairground, are you?"

"I'm scared of it," Bodil said. Her eyes were wide, black pupils swallowing almost all of the blue. "I can sense something... There's badness in the air round here."

James made a blustering sound of annoyance. "What, picking up the emanations, are you? Tuning in to the psychic wavelength and tracing the ley lines?"

Bodil seemed utterly unfazed by him. "Something like that, yes."

"What a bunch of losers," Louise said, then grabbed a handful of the metal fence and began to pull herself, spider-like, up it.

"Lou, what the hell are you doing?" Danny shouted up at her.



"What does it look like I'm doing? A funfair's no fun unless you're actually in it." She turned back to speak to him and as she did her concentration must have slipped because one hand came loose from the fence and for an awful moment he thought she was going to slip fifteen feet back to the ground. "Jesus!" she cursed, but managed to grab back at the railings. Then she laughed and continued her ascent. Louise, he knew, was always at her happiest when she was risking her life.

Sometimes it terrified him to think how she'd cope without him to hold her back, when he was at NYU and she was studying in San Diego—a college she'd chosen purely on its reputation as a party school. Danny had even considered giving up his place in New York, staying behind to keep an eye on his sister. He'd talked to his dad about it and dad had told Danny that he and Louise had been close long enough and it was time for both of them to make their own paths through life. Besides, he said, Louise might talk big but when it came down to it she had the same instinct for self-preservation as anyone else. But then, dad didn't know Louise the way Danny did.

She was nearly at the top of the fence now, her figure a dark blot against the stars. Danny hesitated a second, still oddly reluctant to go anywhere near the abandoned fairground, then he put his hands on the fence and began to climb after her. "Wait here," he said to the others.

"Be careful," Bodil shouted up at him. "There's something... evil in there."

"More importantly, the whole thing's probably on the point of collapse," James added, glaring contemptuously at Bodil.

Danny paused briefly at the top of the fence to take in the view, and his apprehension began to fade away. From up here, he could see far out to sea, to the hazy path of light the moon cut across the water and the spectral white tips of the waves getting closer and closer together as they approached the horizon. Looking the other way, New York glittered like cheap costume jewelry. The incessant muted roar of its traffic faded to little more than an ill-tempered grumble.

He took in a deep breath of the salty air and thought to himself, I'm finally here. This is the first chapter of the rest of my life. Away from family, away from anyone who knows me. I can be anyone I want to be. He wasn't quite sure what new him he might want to construct but he relished the freedom to do it. Then he heard a yelp of alarm from below him and was sharply reminded that part of his family was still here and needed to be looked after.

He shimmied the rest of the way down the fence then dropped the last few feet to land on the broken concrete of the ground. "Everything all right?" he called out to Louise, who was crouched down on the other side of a small hillock. He found that he was instinctively keeping his voice low, as if to avoid waking any restless spirits.

"I'm fine," Louise said irritably. "Caught my foot on a fucking piece of metal, that's all." As impatient as she was with other people's weaknesses, she had even less truck with her own.

"Shoulda looked where you were going then, shouldn't you?" Danny said. Louise never gave sympathy and hated getting it.

"Whatever." She climbed to her feet and walked towards him with a slight limp. "So, what do you wanna do?"

"Hey, this was your idea," he said, looking round him, but then added, "Why don't we climb up the roller coaster, see how far we can get?"

"Might fall down. Doesn't look too steady to me," she said dubiously, peering at the hulking shape in the darkness.

"What's the matter?" he challenged with a wolfish grin. "Chicken?"

Louise grinned back at him. "Last one to the top's a dork." Before she'd even finished speaking she was running towards the wreck of the roller coaster, but Danny knew her all too well and set off just as fast after her.

The whole structure did, indeed, seem on the point of collapse. In fact, some parts of it had fallen in, the twisting wooden track sagging downwards to connect with the ground. It looked like a slightly demented smile, the railings like crooked teeth in its mouth. But the entrance, remarkably, was still intact and Danny and Louise were able to scramble onto the track with almost no difficulty. Louise

reached it just before him but Danny bodychecked her to the ground. He scrambled up before she could recover and hauled himself onto the lowest portion of the ride. He raised his arm in victory and grinned down at her. "Hello, dork."

"Cheater," she said, but he could tell she didn't really mind and she quickly turned away from him to face the rest of the track. "Let's see how high we can go." She inched her way along the struts, arms held out at her sides like a tightrope walker. Danny followed along behind her, carefully checking each board to see if it was sound before trusting his weight to it. Up here, he really could smell the musty, fungal odor of old wood. It must have looked quite a sight, he thought, when the previous roller coaster caught fire.

He had a momentary image of the carriages of the roller coaster, rushing through the air, livid red and yellow flames licking over every inch of them, and the screams of those trapped inside. The vision was so intense he felt a moment's vertigo and when he put his foot down without checking he heard the sickening snap of rotten wood.

"Careful!" Louise snapped, grabbing his hand to steady him.

"Sorry." He shook his head, banishing the image of the doomed roller coaster. "Must be more wasted than I realized."

A few more steps and they were as far as they could go. In front of them, the track warped towards the ground.

By unspoken consent, they sat down on the rails, legs dangling into the void below. Danny lay backwards so that all he could see were the stars and the moon, pinpricks of light in an ocean of darkness. Softly, in the background, he could hear the ocean itself continuing its ceaseless, unrelenting murmur, so gentle and so strong it could wear down rocks and break apart continents given enough time. He wondered if there was any more peaceful place in New York.

"Well, this sucks," Louise said. He heard the rustle of her clothing as she sat up.

Danny lay back a moment longer, enjoying the tranquility, then pushed himself up beside her. "It's great," he said.

"It's boring," Louise replied. "Hey, didn't Rinoka say there's a real fairground here? A working one with rides we can actually go on."

"Yeah, that's it over there, I think," Danny said. He pointed to the dim lights of a Ferris wheel at the other end of the boardwalk. "But no way is it gonna be open now."

"So?" Louise turned to look at him, the moonlight glittering wickedly in her eyes. "If we can break in here, bet we can break in there. What do you think?"

This one, he knew, she probably wouldn't try on her own. "A whole fairground to ourselves?" he said.

"Yeah. No screaming kids, no standing in line for the rides. And no paying."

Danny pressed his hands against the rough wood beneath him and pushed himself to his feet. "We'd get caught, no chance we wouldn't. They're bound to have security at that place, CCTV, the works."

Louise shrugged. "So how much more trouble can we be in tonight?"

Danny strained his eyes towards the lights of the distant fairground, glittering like a promise. The night suddenly felt alive with possibilities, his whole life opening out in front of him and offering him paths he hadn't even known existed, let alone thought of taking. "All right. Why the hell not?"

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The others, of course, thought it was a terrible idea, but when Louise had managed to jimmy open the lock on the gate—a skill she'd picked up from one of the lowlife friends their parents were always telling her to stay away from one by one they slipped in after her. Who could resist the idea of a working fairground all to themselves?

Bodil headed straight for the merry-go-round, sitting on one of the big brightly colored horses and making whinnying and neighing noises that she seemed to find inordinately amusing. Rinoka hopped onto the horse beside her and pretended to be racing, whipping its metal flank with her open palm. Peter stood on the sidelines watching them, smiling for the first time that Danny could remember.

He left them to it and set off with Louise in search of the ghost train. To his surprise and slight annoyance, James chose to tag along with them.

"I thought you didn't believe in any of that shit?" Louise said to him, but her tone was puzzled rather than annoyed—she'd clearly decided it was time to forgive him.

James shrugged. "I don't. I'm just a fan of the design. I used to collect pictures of dark rides when I was younger."

Louise yawned ostentatiously. "Wow, you must really have been the life and soul of the party."

James gave her a sour look but didn't bother responding. The entrance to the ghost train consisted of two enormous iron gates with the words "Abandon hope all ye who enter" written above them inside a great wooden mouth. The mouth was dominated by two sharp white fangs covered in droplets of bright red paint. It all looked very retro—very much, in fact, as if Velma and Shaggy might be hiding somewhere inside. Danny thought it was great.

He headed over to the control desk. "Hey, Lou, how do you switch this thing on?"

His sister squinted at the complex of machinery. "Fucked if I know."

He studied the contents of the booth intently but it was just a mess of switches and levers. Well, what were you expecting? he thought. A big red button with "PRESS HERE" written on it?

"Shit," he said. Now that he'd had the idea, the thought of riding a ghost train all alone in the middle of the night seemed like the most fun ever. He had to do it.

Experimentally, he jabbed at one of the buttons—and the lights at the front of the ride suddenly switched on in an unexpected multi-colored blaze. He jumped back, startled, then blushed as he realized that both James and Louise were laughing at him.

"Are you sure you want to go on the ride?" James asked, straight-faced. "You seem a little nervous to me."

Danny scowled at him—then, as he looked back down at the control panel, he spotted another switch marked "music." Hiding the movement from James, he quickly flipped it and a blaringly loud

Ozzy Osbourne track instantly boomed out of speakers to either side of them.

James, he was pleased to see, didn't just jump—he let out a high-pitched yelp of alarm.

Danny grinned at him. "Nerves playing up?" he asked.

James looked angry for a moment, then he gave a sheepish smile of his own. He strode over to study the controls himself. "You know," he said after a moment, "I think I could get this working."

Danny looked at him dubiously. "Yeah?"

James smiled slightly. "I may not be your idea of a man's man, but I know my electronics. It was a hobby of mine."

"Figures," Louise muttered, but Danny clapped James on the back. "Then be my guest," he said. He went over to the ride, whose metal doors were held shut with a padlock. "Lou?" he said, pointing at it.

She trotted over, pulled a hairpin out of the back pocket of her jeans and in about five seconds flat the lock fell open.

Over at the controls, James looked impressed. "Where did you learn to do that?"

Louise slipped the pin back into her pocket. Danny saw James's eyes track the movement, lingering for longer on his sister's ass than Danny would have liked. "My ex spent some time in juvie hall," she said, helping Danny to pull the handles of the metal gates. They screeched, protesting, but swung open to reveal the interior of the ride, a string of four-person cars sitting ready to receive passengers. Danny grinned.

"Your ex-boyfriend was a juvenile delinquent?" James asked with feigned astonishment. "How unexpected."

Louise flipped him the bird, then hopped into the front car. "Well, come on then," she said to Danny.

Danny hesitated a moment, looking back at James. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" he shouted to him over the tinny clamor of the music still blaring out around them. The name of the song nagged at the back of Danny's mind, but he couldn't quite remember it.

"Not really," James said, frowning down at the controls. "The last time I tried something like this I pressed the wrong button and the

whole thing went up in flames."

After a moment, Danny realized that James was joking and flipped him the finger too.

James grinned back at him. "Strap yourselves in and I'll get you started."

Danny settled back into the seat and turned to tug on the strap. As he pulled it, the whole thing snapped off in his hand. He frowned at the frayed piece of material. "Jesus, I thought they had safety regs on these things."

Louise shrugged. "So? Not likely to crash, is it?"

Danny knew she was right, but he began to feel a nagging sense of unease. Before he could do anything about it, there was a growl of engines and the car he was sitting in jerked harshly forward, throwing him against the metal restraining bar. Louise whooped with pleasure as the big black double doors ahead of them swung open, revealing a dark tunnel seeming to stretch away into infinity.

As the car disappeared into the tunnel and the big dark doors clanged shut behind them, Danny suddenly heard the words of the song booming out of the speakers with startling clarity. "I'm going off the rails on a crazy train."

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The night felt like it was never-ending. Usually when she was on call Kate expected to be woken once or twice during the night, but this time she'd barely crawled back into the small hard bed in the hospital after her fourth call when she got the next one. She dragged herself upright and made to pull on her clothes when she realized that she was still wearing them. She must have fallen straight into bed without undressing after the last case, an eighty year-old woman dying of stomach cancer who'd gone into arrest. They'd spent an hour struggling to save her for the few miserable weeks of life she had left.

Still in a daze, Kate called her pager number and found out that she was needed to offer some advice on an elderly patient's drip by a nurse who probably knew damn well what to do herself but was just

trying to cover her own ass. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and nearly didn't recognize her own face, it was looking so gaunt and haunted. Her hair was a wild bird's nest tangle, and she pulled a hurried comb through it before straightening her white coat and heading out of the room.

The white walls of the hospital seemed to recede before her tired eyes, fading into a featureless and limitless blur. The walk to the wing where the patient was housed was only a short one, but it seemed to take forever, each footstep an effort more monumental than the last.

Maybe Brad was right. Maybe all this was because her sense of time had been warped by too little sleep and too much worry. Certainly anything seemed possible in her present exhausted daze. The barriers between waking and sleeping, fantasy and reality, life and death seemed lower in the small hours of the night.

When she reached the patient it was just as she'd expected, a slight adjustment in the rate of the saline infusion. She asked the nurse to fetch a new bag of dextrose saline, then set about giving the patient—a dark-haired, wizened man in his late sixties—the once over.

According to his chart, he'd been brought in for an emergency appendectomy but there had turned out to be an infection and they were keeping him in for a couple of days of observation. She looked up to find the old man's eyes on her. They were a surprisingly washed-out, chilly blue, lacking any human warmth. "Hey honey," he said, "how'm I doin'?" His voice was harsh and gravelly, like really rough sandpaper.

"You're doing fine, Mr..." she looked down at his chart, "Forelli. You should be out of here in..." Her voice trailed off as she looked back up at him. His face remained the same craggy, impassive mask, but blooming in the center of his forehead was a small flower of red. For a moment it looked like nothing more than a drop of paint.

Then, suddenly, the drop became a fountain of thick maroon blood spurting across the room towards her. Forelli opened his mouth, but all that emerged was a desperate croak and a thin trickle of darker fluid. Watching in stunned horror, Kate saw a large yellow stain spread across the bedclothes as the old man's bladder relaxed in



death and he keeled forward till his face was resting against the ruined sheets.

In that position, the back of his head was exposed and Kate could see the gaping exit wound in his skull, surrounded by torn scraps of skin and blood-soaked shards of bone. In the center of the hole, the curled white meat of his brain was exposed to the air, still faintly pulsing with life.

Kate backed away, too horrified even to scream. Then, in an eye-blink, it was gone and she found herself once again facing the cold blue gaze of Mr Forelli's eyes.

"Jesus fucking Christ, what's the matter with you?" he asked, sitting forward in the bed and looking like it was only the drip attached to his arm which was stopping him from jumping out and grabbing her by the throat.

"You're... you're going to be shot," Kate gasped out. Then, seeing the look of fear and anger in Forelli's eyes, she turned her back and fled.

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Danny couldn't help himself. He was frightened. As soon as the big wooden doors thudded shut behind them and they began to slide forward into the impenetrable darkness, he felt a formless terror creeping up on him. His breath was suddenly short, and his chest felt constricted as if someone or something very heavy was sitting right on top of it. An obviously faked scream was piped into his ear and he jumped and then shivered uncontrollably.

Louise giggled beside him, but he was too twitchy by then to care. When a luminescent skeleton appeared from a side corridor and lunged towards him, he ducked out of the way, hiding his face behind his hands. Louise's giggles stopped. "Are you okay?" she asked, her sharp face softened by genuine concern.

"I'm... I'm fine," he managed to croak out, trying by conscious effort to slow his heartbeat. For a moment, he felt himself succeeding, calming down—and then a giant spider suddenly bobbed down into the air in front of them and he let out a startled cry and

reared upright in his seat. Louise grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back down just before he knocked himself out on the next arched doorway. His head only cleared it by an inch as the ghost train clanked through.

Danny realized that he was gasping for breath as if he'd just sprinted a mile, and his skin was prickling with a panicky sweat. He began to feel as if the darkness had a physical weight, crushing him down into his seat, pushing the air relentlessly out of his lungs. Jesus, he thought, what the fuck's wrong with me?

The next chamber of the ride was done up as some sort of Satanic shrine. The walls were lined with demonic masks, and as Danny watched they seemed to wink and leer at him, their laughter ringing out around the chamber in mockery. The air was suddenly thick with the smell of sulfur and decay. Desperately, trying to block it all out, to find some calm point inside himself, he screwed his eyes shut, balling his hands into fists and willing it all to end, please just end—

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—and when he opened them again, it had ended. He blinked around, disoriented, to see himself sitting in the steel and green interior of the subway. The train was just pulling out of a station—51st Street he saw in a quick glance through the window—gently swaying from side to side as it accelerated away. He blinked again, waiting for the vision to go away, but it remained stubbornly solid. Louise was sitting on his left side, leaning across the aisle to talk to Rinoka sitting opposite with the rest of the students and Mary-Beth. To his left was a young Asian man, hunched forward over his newspaper, tinny music emerging from the earphones on his head. It was loud enough for Danny to recognize the song: "Crazy Train" by Ozzy Osbourne.

As he realized this he felt himself gradually emerging from his haze. He must have nodded off on the train on the way back from the Metropolitan Museum, dreamed all that stuff about the club and the fairground. He shook his head like a dog coming out of water and looked round at his sister.

"Hey, doofus. What are you reading?" he asked.

She flipped up the cover of the book she was casually flipping through. It was Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, hardly his sister's usual reading material. When she cracked open a book at all it tended either to be by either Stephen King or William Burroughs.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It was lying on the seat. Someone must have left it behind."

"Any good?" he asked, feeling vaguely unsettled for no apparent reason.

She tossed it onto the floor. "No."

Across the aisle Peter tutted and picked it up. "Books are important, you should treat them with respect," he scolded in his soft, clipped voice. Then he got a look at the cover, and blanched.

James saw his expression. "Are you okay?" he asked, sounding more annoyed than concerned. "You're not going to be sick or anything are you?" He stood up hurriedly, grabbing one of the overhead handholds. It snapped off as he grabbed it and he toppled back into his seat. "Bloody hell," he said, staring at the broken-off loop of material in disgust. The sight of the frayed leather filled Danny with an inexplicable chill.

Peter, eyes fixed morosely on the floor, hadn't even noticed. Eventually he looked up and shook his head. "It's... It's..." He swallowed, hard, then managed to compose himself. "It's the book my mother was reading before she died," he said finally, his voice flat with suppressed emotions. "My father still keeps it beside his bed."

"Oh," James said and quickly buried his head back in his own book, clearly embarrassed by this unsolicited personal revelation.

Mary-Beth reached out a hand and laid it comfortably on Peter's arm. He smiled wanly back at her but didn't say anything.

Louise turned to Danny and hissed in his ear, "Jesus, could this lot be any more depressing?"

Danny frowned at her, slightly ashamed of her insensitivity, and she subsided. But the uneasy feeling didn't leave him. In fact, as the train drew away from the station it began to intensify. The noise of

the wheels on the tracks seemed unnaturally loud, and the Asian guy on his left seemed to think so too because he cranked the volume on his iPod right up so the lyrics of the song suddenly blared into the air around him, Ozzy Osbourne singing "I'm going off the rails on a crazy train" in his big, rough voice.

As soon as he heard the words, Danny's fear seemed to ratchet up a notch. The train was really accelerating now, swaying hard from side to side as it traveled. There was a jerk as it seemed to hit something solid on the track but instead of slowing down it accelerated yet more, picking up momentum until it appeared to be hurtling at an unstoppable speed.

And then, suddenly, two things happened at once: the lights cut out, and the driver slammed on the brakes. Danny found himself flung violently forward, colliding with Louise and James as they tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs. All around them people were finding themselves in the same position and Danny heard cursing and shouting in about ten different languages.

"Fuck, I think I've broken my wrist," Louise said from somewhere beside him.

Danny groped out an arm, trying to find his twin, see if she was okay, but all he managed to connect with was a hairy, bony ankle that he guessed belonged to James. Down here on the floor he was far more aware of the stale urine stench that pervaded the whole car. Not wanting to spend any more time than necessary in contact with it he carefully levered himself to his feet, holding his palms out loosely at his sides to prevent anyone else walking into him.

"Lou?" he called out, loudly enough to be heard over the hubbub around him. It surprised him how helpless he felt without his eyesight to guide him. He found childhood fears reawakening, of the things that lurk in the shadow or under your bed and was only able to banish them from his mind with difficulty.

"I'm right here." Her voice emerged from about two feet to his left. "I fell on my hand, think I mighta busted my wrist." He could tell from the strain in her voice that she was in real pain, and instinctively reached out towards her. After a moment, her hand—

her good hand, he presumed—fumbled through the darkness into his and he drew her towards him.

"Here, there's a seat behind us," he said, and carefully guided her down, using his foot to scout out the territory. He felt her wince as she moved and knew that she must be in a great deal of discomfort.

He was just pulling her wrist gingerly towards him when the emergency lights snapped on. In their dull reddish glow Louise's face looked ghostly pale, while the faces of the others around him seemed to take on a demonic cast. Peter, bent solicitously over Mary-Beth, looked like his normally gentle face had been carved from granite. James had darkened under the red from pale coffee to rich ebony. The light was too feeble to penetrate all the shadows and he could see some people instinctively flinch away from the darkness under the seats, as if not sure what it might contain. Perversely, it was only now he could see again that he became aware of what his ears were telling him. Aside from the babble of voices, there was an ominous silence. The train's engines were completely dead.

Danny forced himself to focus on the immediate problem and turned his attention to examining Louise's wrist, gently probing it with his fingers. Despite the low lighting he could see that it was red and swollen and she let out a stifled gasp of pain when he touched it. It was definitely sprained, maybe broken.

He tried to get a closer look, but found himself distracted by a nagging worry. It took him a moment to figure out what it was. The babble of conversation in the carriage had been joined by a new noise, the noise of an engine at full speed. But not their engine. In the time it took him to realize this, the noise had already increased in volume to the level where a few other people noticed it too.

Louise cried out as his hand tightened reflexively on her wrist. "Shit, Danny!"

"Sorry," he said absently, but all his attention was focused on the noise. The noise, he suddenly realized, that was another train speeding towards them.

He jumped to his feet, pulling Louise up beside him, this time paying no attention to her pained gasp. "Listen!" he shouted, and he

saw several heads snap towards him. "It's another train. It's heading straight for us."

Louise cocked her head and from the sudden panicked expression on her face he knew she'd heard it too.

"It's okay," James said, though Danny saw him take an unconscious step backwards. "It'll brake before it gets here, these things are designed not to crash."

But even as he was speaking, Danny could hear the other train getting louder and louder, accelerating not decelerating towards them.

"Oh God—" he said, and then it hit.

The collision threw Danny backwards with such force that he felt the whiplash crack of his spine and when he impacted on the back wall of the carriage, the breath was knocked out of him so hard that he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to suck it back in again. A second later, his body was crushed further still when Louise was flung against him, her elbow catching him painfully under his ribs.

In front of him, in the dim hellish light, Danny could see that James and Peter had been flung against the windows, splayed like flies on a windscreen. Mary-Beth was lying flattened along the seats and he thought he could hear her moans of pain over the screams of the other passengers but he didn't have long to wonder because the jarring impact had only been the beginning.

Rinoka, miraculously, had managed to keep her feet. She was standing in the center of the carriage, almost uniquely upright among all the passengers, holding her ponytails away from her face and frowning towards the source of the impact as if she still hadn't quite figured out what was going on. And then, with a horrible metallic tearing sound, the door between the carriages detached itself from its hinges and swung end over end through the air towards Rinoka, making a deep ululating noise as it spun.

Rinoka only had time to half-lift her hand towards it, as if she thought she might be able to push it away—and then the jagged, torn steel of the door caught her just below her breasts.

As the great lump of metal ripped through her, Danny saw the blood spurt out along the edges, spraying a fine red mist over

everything in its path. At first, it almost looked as if Rinoka was unharmed, as if the door would simply become fused with her body. But as it carried on through, he saw her top half topple forwards, exposing a neat cross-section through her chest cavity. Her bony ribs poked into the air below the great, gristly muscle of her heart. As if in slow motion, Danny saw it beat once, twice—and a scarlet spurt of blood erupted from Rinoka's mouth. Below, her legs and half her torso collapsed to the ground, spilling the veiny length of her gut onto the floor of the car to twist and coil like a snake in its death throes. For one second, he saw Rinoka's eyes staring down uncomprehendingly at the mess of her internal organs and then they dimmed and died.

And then the door was through her and Peter was the next person in its path. In passing through Rinoka the door, now slick with her blood, had lost some of its momentum. It didn't slice through the German boy but instead caught him full on, pressing him back against the window of the carriage with a force far stronger than any flesh could resist. Danny saw the metal crush against Peter's skull and there was—perhaps—a moment of resistance before the heavy bone gave way and the brains and blood within spurted out to either side under high pressure. Danny had opened his mouth to scream and the white-red pulp that had once held someone's consciousness hit him right in the face and slid greasily down his throat before he could prevent it.

Danny retched instantly, the metallic meaty taste of the brain matter joined in his mouth by the sting of bile. He heard Louise screaming in front of him and knew that she must have been hit too but now it was all happening so fast that he couldn't follow it any more. The far wall of the car was hurtling towards them, driven inward by the force of the collision so relentlessly he could feel the air compressing and his ears popped with the pressure. The people in its path were reduced to a detritus of bone and blood and sloppy wet organs as fast as if someone had placed them all in a mincer. Danny just had time to catch Bodil's eye as a fragment of metal tore sideways through her face, sheering it off to expose the triangular

bones of her nose and the severed, spurting stump of her tongue, and then something hit him and it all went black—

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—and his eyes jerked open on a choked scream to see a devil mask rushing towards him and he flinched and covered his head, wondering what he'd done in life to deserve being sent here, when the ghost train finally burst out of the tunnel and into the silver moonlight of the night outside.

"Fuck! Danny, what the hell's the matter with you?" Louise said. And he could see James looking at him in shock as he bit off the last of his scream.

But Danny didn't have any time to speak to them. He scrambled out of the car, tripping over the bar and painfully onto his knees on the hard concrete and then he emptied the entire contents of his stomach onto the ground in uncontrollable, heaving jerks.

He was still vomiting when the police turned up and arrested them all for trespass.

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Tiny Tim, which they called him on account of his enormous bulk, ducked his head as he came in to see Tony, holding out the big bunch of carnations in front of him like some kind of shield. Not that Tim should have any reason to fear the old man—he paid his dues and stayed respectful—but being ill had always made Tony cranky and no one ever died being too careful. Tim hadn't risen to his present high position within the family by underestimating anyone, least of all his boss.

He was clearly right in his guess about Tony's mood because as soon as Tim approached the bed Tony grabbed the bunch of flowers and threw them impatiently on the floor. Behind him, Tim heard the nurse tut but she didn't say anything out loud, obviously used to Tony's behavior by now.

"What do ya think I am, a woman?" Tony asked in his gravelly voice, a scowl deepening the craggy wrinkles in his face.



"No Tony, I thought they might make the room look more cheerful."

"Do I look like I want cheerin' up?"

Tim shook his head. "No, Tony, you don't."

Tony glared at him a moment longer then turned to the nurse and shouted, "Get out!"

Her mouth pinched into a tight moue of irritation, but then she left without a word and shut the door behind her. It was only when Tim looked back at Tony's face that he realized something serious was bothering him, something beyond the aggravation of being incapacitated, out of control for a few days.

"What's the matter?" Tim asked, perching his bulk on a corner of the white-sheeted bed. "Something happened?"

Tony grimaced, making his already sour face look even more lemony. "You could say that, yeah. A few hours ago I got a death threat."

Tim shook his head in disbelief. "You're kidding!"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

Tim studied Tony's drawn face and shook his head again. "No, Tony, you don't."

"It was some little girl dressed as a doctor," Tony continued after a moment. "Came in here like she fucking owned the place, did something to my drip for god's sake, then told me I was gonna get shot."

"Who was she?" Tim asked.

This didn't improve Tony's temper either. "How the fuck should I know?" he screamed, his face going bright red in one of the sudden rages for which he was famous. "That's what I fucking pay you for! I want you to find out who she was, where she lives, who she's working for. And then..."

He didn't need to say the rest. Tim already knew exactly what to do.

# FOUR

James couldn't quite believe he'd managed to get himself arrested a mere twenty-four hours after arriving in New York. His parents would be so proud, he thought and let out a bark of laughter—which he quickly stifled when he saw the two cops in the front seat turning round to glare at him. At least Louise had had the presence of mind to give them Mary-Beth's name and after speaking to her the officers had agreed to take them straight back to the hotel rather than to the station. James was profoundly grateful. He really couldn't face a night in the cells, especially with the monstrous hangover that was rising along with the sun.

Bodil, who was sharing the ride with him, didn't look like any of it worried her in the slightest. She was singing some song to herself in Danish and staring fascinated out of the window as Brooklyn slid by outside.

"Get arrested often, do you?" he asked her.

She turned towards him, one pale eyebrow raised enquiringly. "What makes you say that?"

James shrugged. "You just don't seem very bothered, that's all."

"Neither do you," she said.

James realized that he wasn't. Maybe it was that it was now so late, or more accurately so early—somewhere around five in the morning—that everything had taken on the unreal aura of a dream. No doubt he'd wake up sometime tomorrow in a cold sweat wondering just what the hell he'd been doing. "I'm sure I'll regret it later," he told her.

"Why?" Bodil asked. She seemed genuinely curious. Her face and voice were more focused now than when he'd first met her, the keen intelligence in her blue eyes no longer masked behind a haze of dope.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "How about because I provoked Peter into punching Louise so we got kicked out of a club and then arrested by the police and now they'll probably never let us in the country again?"

Bodil's grin widened. "But it's been fun, hasn't it?"

James sighed. "You sound like my mother."

"That's funny," Bodil said, "because you sound like mine."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes as the buildings flicked past them outside, brown exteriors painted pink and red by the rising sun. Life was beginning to return to New York along with the light, as the streets started to fill with the delivery men and hot dog vendors and garbage collectors who were the early morning denizens of cities the world over.

"Your parents are hippies, aren't they?" Bodil said after a few more moments' silence.

James continued to stare out of the window. "Yep."

"Cool. You must have had a very exciting childhood."

James sighed. "No, not really."

Bodil touched his arm, urging him to look at her. He saw that her face was uncharacteristically serious. "But why not? It must be wonderful, to have parents who understand you, who don't enforce rules and regulations to make you conform so that in ten years time you can be as gray and boring and old as they are."

"So what are your parents like then?" he asked her when he realized she wasn't just going to let the conversation drop.

"Gray and boring and old," she said in her singsong lilt. Then, when he continued to look at her expectantly, she continued, "They're both business people, very powerful, very rich, you know? They work such long hours, sometimes I don't see them for a whole week. And they want to run the house like a company, nothing disturbing the order. Sometimes I think they think of me as a... a worker in one of their shops, not a daughter."

"Sometimes I think my parents think of me as one of their friends, not their son," James said bitterly.

Bodil looked puzzled. "But this sounds great, to have a friendship with your parents."

James didn't know why he was bothering to explain, but suddenly it seemed very important that Bodil should understand. "Not when you're ten," he said vehemently, "and you're waiting for them to pick you up from school but you end up waiting two hours then having to go home with the headmaster because they were working on a

painting and they got so 'in tune with their art' they forgot all about you. Or when you got beaten up at school and called a 'coon poof' by a bunch of older kids so your parents go round to their parents and ask them if they'd like to take part in a race and gender awareness seminar."

Bodil laughed. "They didn't!"

Despite himself, James felt a smile twitching his own lips. "Oh yes they did. It was just as well they decided to move to a tree-house community in Peru the next week or I think the kids at school might actually have killed me."

"Well," Bodil said, "at least your parents didn't get you a filofax for your eighth birthday." She leaned back in the seat and crossed her arms behind her head. "But it doesn't matter, does it?"

"What do you mean?" James said. "Please don't tell me you're going to come out with some new-age bullshit about how we all the get the parents we karmically deserve, or it'll be okay in the next life when we'll be reborn as slugs or something."

Bodil closed her eyes and turned her head towards the rising sun, which called out golden highlights from her hair. "No, I was just meaning that we're free of it now. We're eighteen, independent. And this holiday is the beginning of the rest of our lives."

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Louise fidgeted irritably on the hard plastic of the chair and glanced over unlovingly at the police officer beside her. It was ridiculous that they'd brought Danny to the hospital, but her brother was so pale and shaken that they'd insisted he get checked over, probably afraid of a lawsuit. Uncharacteristically, Danny had failed to protest. She didn't know what was wrong with him tonight. He'd really lost it on the ghost train, in a way she'd never seen before and afterwards he'd just clammed up, refusing to tell her what was the matter.

She was, she realized, worried about him and she hated it. She was supposed to be the reckless one, the one who got into trouble and had to be got out of it by her big brother. He was supposed to worry

about her. She didn't like to admit that she depended on him, but he was her twin for fuck's sake. He'd been there since the moment she was born and he was the closest friend she'd ever had, even when he was being a complete dick.

She hated hospitals, too, she realized, glancing around at the sparkling white interior of the place and the bustle of people who all looked like they'd rather be elsewhere, doctors and nurses included. It reminded her of when she was seven and her grandmother, her dad's mom, had been lying dying in a place just like this and they'd taken Louise in to see her but she'd thrown herself on the floor and screamed and shouted that she didn't want to go until they'd been forced to take her home and she'd never seen the old lady again before she died. Now she could barely even remember what she looked like outside of the set, awkward poses of family snaps. Hospitals were bad places, period. She kicked out at the leg of the chair beside her, pleased to see that the soles of her sneakers left a muddy print on the glaring orange plastic.

The police officer looked round at her. "He'll be okay, miss," he said kindly, rubbing a hand through his gray bristle of hair. "Probably just needed to empty his stomach out."

Louise realized that her worry must have been showing on her face and hurriedly arranged it into a scowl. "Yeah, whatever," she said.

The officer shook his head in resignation and went back to picking at his thumbnail.

Bored, Louise found her gaze wandering around the waiting room. It settled, after a moment, on possibly the biggest guy she'd ever seen. Not fat, though he definitely had a belly on him, but at least six and a half feet tall and as solid and hard as concrete reinforced with steel. At the moment, he was leaning over the reception table like a small mountain on the point of a major avalanche. The poor Latino woman behind it who couldn't have weighed in at more than a hundred pounds if she'd jumped up and down on the scales, was leaning as far back from him as he could.

"I'm looking for a doctor," the man said, his voice a deep rumble that Louise suspected was intended to be a whisper but which echoed around the whole large reception area.

"Anyone specific?" the receptionist asked. Her voice was also loud. Louise suspected she was trying to attract the attention of security without antagonizing the man, but there was no one within earshot, or at least no one who had the balls to intervene.

"I'm looking for the doctor who's been treating Mr Forelli," the man said. He leaned back slightly as if suddenly realizing that he might be frightening the woman.

The woman's reply was too quiet for Louise to hear, but the man frowned when he heard it.

"I'm... family," he said.

Her viewing was interrupted by the other policeman, returning with her brother trailing a couple of steps behind.

"Everything check out?" the cop beside her asked.

The other officer, a big black guy with a great rounded dome of a head and a bulbous nose that had evidently been broken more than once, nodded. "Nothing wrong with him that a stint with Betty Ford wouldn't cure," he said.

Danny, still looking like he might collapse at any point, came to stand beside her. "You sure you're okay?" she whispered to him.

He shrugged, looking stubbornly at the ground and not at her.

As they climbed into the car with the officers she couldn't escape the feeling that, whatever the doctors said, her brother wasn't all right at all.

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Peter felt terrible, eaten up with guilt inside. MaryBeth was as furious with them as he'd expected, but it was the hurt underneath the anger that made him feel so awful. They'd let her down, and she didn't deserve it.

"What I don't understand," she was saying now, with the students lined up in front of her like ragtag recruits in an army parade, "is how y'all could be so stupid."

James, Peter could see, was looking as ashamed as he was. The British boy's cheeks were flushed a light pink beneath his brown skin and he couldn't meet anyone's eyes, particularly Mary-Beth's. Bodil

was looking equally shamefaced, though there was something about her expression that suggested to Peter that it was one she had consciously practiced and deployed whenever she thought it would do her some good.

The twins, on the other, hand didn't even seem to be listening to her. Danny was leaning against the wall as if he was completely drained of energy, and Louise was looking at her brother with concern. Peter had never had the chance to hear exactly what happened inside the ghost train ride that had got them into so much trouble, but he knew whatever it was had shaken the normally sunny American badly.

Only Rinoka seemed to be unaffected by it all. She just looked bored.

Mary-Beth glared at them in silence for a long moment, then sighed. "In case some of you don't know, the drinking age in these parts is twenty-one, not eighteen, and even then a sensible person would think twice before throwing so much liquor down them they end up heaving their stomach on the street." She looked at Danny as she said this, and he looked up wanly to meet her gaze before hurriedly dropping his eyes again.

"Not to mention," she continued, her voice heating, "breaking into private property in the middle of the night. You're lucky the officers aren't pressing charges. Believe me, I had to do some fast talking to stop them."

"Thank you," Peter said humbly, but that just seemed to enrage Mary-Beth further.

"Don't thank me!" she snapped. "If I hadn't been concerned about making sure this trip could go ahead in future years with more deserving students I would have let you rot in a jail cell and hoped it might have taught you a lesson."

Peter started mouthing sorry again, then stopped himself, not certain if this too would just antagonize her.

Then, as if the last outburst had drained the remains of her energy, Mary-Beth slumped backwards into one of the lobby's armchairs. She ran a hand wearily over her face, briefly smoothing out some of its many wrinkles. "It's the lack of respect that troubles me," she said

at last, her voice as tired as her face. Peter was forcefully reminded again how old she was. And it was only six in the morning; the police must have woken her from her sleep—if she'd been sleeping at all. It occurred to Peter, with a further jolt of guilt, that she probably hadn't been able to get to sleep for worrying about them.

What had he been thinking? Why had he gone on that crazy outing anyway? It wasn't as if he'd enjoyed it. Unconsciously, he touched his stomach where Danny had punched him and felt a tender spot that he was sure by tomorrow would be a large bruise. But there had been something in him, some impish spark he hadn't even known he possessed, that had flared into life at the thought of the illicit expedition. He had been, he realized, rather pleased to be bad for a change.

His father had been right. He wasn't to be trusted in the outside world. He'd already let him down and he'd only been here two days. He toyed briefly with the idea of not telling his father about what had happened, but Mary-Beth had informed them that letters would be sent home to all their parents and anyway Peter knew that his old man would take one look at him and know that something was up, that his son was hiding something. His father always approached Peter with the presumption that he'd sinned in some way and somehow he always found the evidence to support it. For a brief instant, Peter felt a bitterness towards the parent who always assumed the worst about him and seemed, in as far as he ever showed happiness, to be pleased whenever he found it. But he quickly pushed that thought aside.

"You're all grounded," Mary-Beth said finally. "I'm sure you've guessed that. The trip will continue, the planned outings, since there's no way to send you home ahead of time, but you'll be spending every evening in here with me. Now go to your beds and get some sleep. You need to be up in four hours for the trip to the Cloisters."

Well, Peter thought morosely, it was what they deserved.

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Louise couldn't sleep, whatever Mary-Beth might have ordered. They'd turned the lights out, but she lay in the dark staring up at the barely visible crack in the ceiling and wondering what was eating Danny. He'd brushed off all her attempts to talk to him on the drive back and had stripped down to his boxers and fallen into bed without a further word.

She heard him shift restlessly, though his breathing remained deep and even. She knew he was only pretending to be asleep—they'd shared too many tents on too many camping trips for her to be taken in by his act.

"Danno?" she said softly, staring up at the ceiling.

He didn't reply, though she heard the rustle of his sheets as he stiffened.

"I know you're awake," she said. "Come on, Doodle, talk to me."

It seemed that the use of her childhood nickname for him finally got through, because he rolled over and flipped on the dim lamp on the table between their two beds. His face suddenly shone out of the darkness at her, looking alarmingly pale, almost spectral. His light brown eyes were lost in shadows. "Go to sleep, Lou," he said.

She shook her head. "Not till you tell me what's up."

He sighed but he didn't switch the light back off. He knew how stubborn she could be and anyway, she sensed, he wanted to talk about it—get whatever it was off his chest. "I... I think I passed out on the ride, that's all," he said eventually.

"Passed out?" Louise frowned. "Do you think you're ill? Did you fall off your bike on the journey, bang your head some time? You're not suffering from a concussion, are you?" She shut up as soon as she realized how much like their mother she sounded.

"Nothing like that," Danny said. Then after another long silence, when she thought he might really have fallen asleep, he continued, "I just... I had a... a vision, a hallucination I guess while I was in there."

Louise sat up in bed. "Really? Cool!"

Danny scowled at her. "It wasn't cool. It was sick."

He turned onto his back, and she could see his pale face staring up at the ceiling, eyes unblinking.

"So, what happened?" she said when it was obvious he wasn't going to continue. "What did you see?"

Danny didn't turn back to look at her. He continued gazing blankly at the ceiling, as he said, "We were in a train crash."

Louise sagged back down, disappointed. "Is that all? I thought you'd at least have had some kind of vision of the world getting eaten by a giant caterpillar, or everyone turning into pumpkin pies or some shit like that."

"This wasn't an acid trip, Lou," her brother said, but she could see his lips curling upwards in a slight smile and his voice had lost some of its dull flatness.

"Yeah, you're telling me. Jesus—even your hallucinations are boring." She frowned at him suddenly. "Unless the train was crashing into a giant moth or something."

This time Danny actually laughed. "Nope. Just another train."

She reached over and turned off the light, relieved. "And to think I was worried about you. Loser."

Breakfast was pretty subdued. Mary-Beth took them to a small diner down the street, but she answered any questions they asked with tight-lipped politeness and Danny could tell they still weren't forgiven. He didn't blame her. At least he was feeling a little better himself this morning, last night's vision fading like a nightmare into the background of his consciousness.

Louise had recovered from her brief concern about him and was back to being the obnoxiously bratty sister he knew so well. At the moment, she was trying to throw the blueberries from her muffin into the wastebasket at the other side of the room and mostly missing. He could see Mary-Beth watching her with disapproval, but she didn't say anything, probably having given Louise up as a lost cause—most people did.

At the opposite end of the table, James was also watching Louise. She had, he couldn't help noticing, extremely nice breasts, outlined sharply against the tight white material of her T-shirt. Small, but shapely, he thought—then blushed as he realized the direction his mind was wandering. Bodil, who was sitting opposite him, noticed the direction of his gaze.

"You're not her type, you know," she said.

James tried to look puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

Bodil rolled her eyes but didn't bother to call him on the evasion. "She thinks you're boring," she added.

"Well, thanks," James said dryly, though he suspected she was right. Anyway, it wasn't really conversation he was interested in with Louise.

They ate for a moment longer in silence, James digging into his stack of pancakes with gusto. He loved American breakfasts, the best thing about food in this country by far.

"I don't think you're boring," Bodil told him suddenly.

James looked up, startled, to see her bright blue eyes looking at him appraisingly. "No," he said, "you just think I'm a twat."

Bodil laughed, but she didn't contradict him.

Further down the table, Peter watched their effortless flirting with envy. How did they do it? In school he'd been so painfully shy he'd been unable to stutter out more than a few words whenever someone female was within ten feet of him. Not that it would have done him much good if he could. His father would barely let him have any of his male friends back to the house, let alone a girlfriend. But, he reminded himself, he was on vacation now. He could be a different person here. He was fed up with the guilt, the self-recrimination that had tormented him last night. The whole point of coming here had been to get away from his father, not bring him along as a nagging voice in the back of his head.

Deliberately, he turned to Rinoka beside him. "So, which part of Japan are you from?"

Rinoka looked up from picking at the fruit salad she'd chosen for her breakfast. She had very pretty eyes, like dark, delicate almonds framed by the sharp cut of her black hair between two lopsided ponytails. "Tokyo," she said flatly. She looked like she wasn't feeling terribly well this morning and certainly like she didn't really welcome the chance for a chat.

Still, Peter decided not to give up. "And do you like that?" he asked politely.

Rinoka gave him a look of utter contempt. "Of course. Tokyo, New York, London—these are the only three cities worth living in."

"Oh," Peter said, a little offended. "But what about Berlin?"

"The Love Parade and apart from that..." Rinoka shrugged.

"You like pop music then," Peter persevered. "Which bands are you into?"

Now Rinoka was looking at him as if he was an alien. "Funky house, uplifting house, tech-trance, progressive, some breakbeats but mainly straight four-to-the-floor."

Peter gave up.

And at the head of the table, Mary-Beth watched them all and felt some of her anger draining away. They were so young, so full of life, it warmed her to see them. What they had done yesterday was thoughtless, irresponsible—in fact absolutely typical of teenagers. It was only her fear for them that had made her lash out. She knew how fragile a young life could be. After she'd lost... after her own loss, it had taken her years to stop seeing a lethal menace on every corner, a potential accident in every car that drove by or a potential killer in every man who walked down the road.

As the years had passed, she'd managed to train herself away from that and her work with the children at Youth Across Continents had allowed her to stop wanting to wrap every youngster in her life in cotton wool. But still, New York was a big and dangerous place, full of hazards that weren't just products of her imagination. She looked down the table at her charges. At quiet Peter who appeared finally to have come out of his shell a little, talking to the Japanese girl Rinoka. Rinoka was a strange one, seemingly obsessed with the surface of things, but Mary-Beth was sure that underneath that lay a person with real thoughts and real feelings. She determined to spend the week getting to know that person.

And then there was the well-mannered British boy, James. He was talking to the Dane, Bodil, who'd finally woken out of her drug-induced stupor. He looked more relaxed than she'd yet seen him and though she could tell he was trying to hide it, she suspected that he had a soft spot for the blonde-proof, if she'd ever needed any, that opposites did attract. Finally, the Californian twins were laughing

and joking, playing at kicking each other under the table as if they were still eight. Louise was a tearaway, no doubt about it, but there was a joyfulness about the two of them that Mary-Beth found warming. She realized that she was smiling affectionately at all of them.

Then she felt the subway, which must run nearly underneath the diner, shake the plates on the table—and a bottle of ketchup, which had been sitting near the edge, swayed then toppled to the ground. It shattered, spilling its contents onto the pristine white tiles.

Mary Beth looked at the stain spreading across the floor and felt a sudden sharp stab of apprehension in her stomach.

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Kate was so preoccupied with thinking of nothing, with clearing her head of all the mad thoughts that had been tumbling through it in the last week, that at first she didn't even notice the feeling. But gradually she became aware of a shivery, tingling sensation between her shoulder blades, the subliminal perception that somewhere out of sight, someone was watching her.

She found that she was constantly flicking her head to each side, trying to catch whoever it was, but there was never anyone there, or at least no one beyond the usual New York pedestrians, hurrying to their destinations with scant regard for anyone else sharing the sidewalk. It's just paranoia, she told herself, lack of sleep and too many worries making me even more screwed-up than I was before.

But the feeling followed her down into the subway and as she sat on the train she found herself studying each of her fellow passengers closely, wondering if they were the ones whose eyes she could feel boring into her every time she looked away. Opposite her was an elderly man in a dark overcoat, shoulders hunched inward as if warding off some threatening danger or shouldering a burden far too heavy for him. Could it be him? He seemed to sense her eyes on him and jerked his own up to meet hers. She saw the alarm and fear in his expression.

Oh God, she thought, I'm turning into one of those crazies everyone tries to avoid sitting next to on the subway. Of course the old man wasn't following her. He was probably traveling uptown to visit his grandchildren and now she'd scared him so much that she saw him get up and hurriedly get off at the next stop. Blushing, she locked her eyes resolutely downward for the rest of the journey.

. The funny thing was, in a lot of other ways she felt better. Though she still broke out in a cold sweat whenever she thought about having told the old man in the hospital he was going to get shot, the visions had ceased to torment her. It wasn't that she didn't still have them, but somehow she'd come to terms with them. She'd accepted, somewhere, that she really was being granted premonitions of people's ends, and the very act of acceptance seemed to have taken the horror out of it.

The rest of the journey to the hospital passed without incident and although the itchy feeling between Kate's shoulder blades remained, she managed to ignore it. When she emerged from the station into the bright light of an unusually crisp summer morning and saw the hospital building looming over the junction, casting its dark shadow on all the people crowding through its doors, her heart for once didn't sink. Maybe it was finally over. Okay, so she might still get the occasional vision now and again, but if she just accepted it and moved on, she could live a normal life.

She was still feeling cheerful as she joined the group of med students clustered around Dr Wantman as he prepared to lead them on his rounds. He smiled his endearingly crooked smile at her as she joined them, and she thought that he couldn't possibly know about the Sux racing or she'd have got a far less warm welcome from him. Her spirits lifted even further and she smiled broadly back. Her jaw ached with the movement and she realized it had been quite a while since she'd last made it.

As Dr Wantman began to explain the case he was covering, a middle-aged woman in renal failure, Saul leaned over to her. "Late again, Katie," he hissed, leering at her. "Brad been keeping you up late?"

Kate scowled at him. "None of your business, Saul."

Saul held his hands up in a mock-defensive gesture. "Hey, just asking. Anyway, at least you missed the guy who was looking for you earlier. Didn't like the look of him at all."

Kate felt a slight chill in her spine. "What guy?"

Saul shook his head. "I don't know. He was big—huge actually." He looked at her, his broad face unusually serious. "Everything okay, Shelley? Only he didn't look like the kind of man you'd want to be messing with and he sounded pissed off."

Kate swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat, all trace of her good mood evaporating in an instant.

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After breakfast, Mary-Beth led them towards 34th Street to take the subway up to the Cloisters, some offshoot of the Met that housed a collection of religious artifacts or some shit like that. Louise wasn't very interested, but Danny seemed keen and anyway the old lady was keeping such a close eye on them now there was absolutely no way they were going to get away to do something more exciting. At least it was a nice day. The sun was beating down on the sidewalk and on the back of her neck—where she'd forgotten to put any lotion—but for once it was a dry heat, burning cleanly through her like a laser. The city looked fresh in the yellow light and everyone seemed a little better now that the oppressive weight of the humidity had been lifted off them. Even Mary-Beth managed a smile, though Louise thought it might crack her face if she wasn't careful, splitting it along the crazy lines of her network of wrinkles.

Danny was talking to the geeky English boy James as they strolled down 32nd Street, so she sauntered over to rescue him. Also, she could see Peter looking in her direction and she was very much afraid that if she didn't make a quick getaway he'd come over and bore her rigid for the rest of the journey.

"It's not as simple as that," James was saying as she approached. "The evidence from Henry the Sixth suggests that—"

"Jesus," Louise interrupted. "Do you ever talk about anything interesting?"

James glared at her, then smiled sweetly and entirely falsely. "Not if I can help it," he said.

Louise ignored him and turned to Danny. "Come on Danno, I need to talk." She took him by the arm and dragged him away from James.

"Sorry," he said to James as she pulled him away, but James just waved an arm dismissively and sauntered over to Bodil. It was pretty obvious he wanted to get inside her pants, though Louise didn't rate his chances.

"So, what is it?" Danny asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Nothing," Louise said, shrugging. "Just thought you'd want an excuse to get away from Captain Tedium."

Danny brushed a hand back through his sandy hair, his golden eyes glittering at her disapprovingly. "Don't be mean, Lou. He's okay."

"Yeah, in a bore-you-to-death kind of way." She sighed and looked around, taking in the panhandler on the corner and the garbage blowing down the sidewalk. "You sure you want to spend the next three years here? Place seems like kind of a dump to me."

As she said it, the reality of their impending separation began to sink in. She literally couldn't imagine what life was going to be like without him. He had always been there, in every single memory she had, her shadow, her better half. Being bad was only fun when he was around to roll his eyes, to cover for her, or make excuses when she couldn't avoid getting caught. Would they grow apart once they were separated? The idea filled her with an almost physical pain. Would they meet again in Spring Break to find that they didn't have anything to say to each other any more?

Maybe he'd get a girlfriend. Of course he'd get a girlfriend, he was a good-looking guy (though thinking about him that way made her feel uncomfortable) and he'd never had any shortage of chicks hanging around him at high school. He'd dated a few, though none too seriously, and Louise wondered now what it would be like if he did get serious about someone, if he started thinking about this other person first and Louise second. She found that she hated the idea with a fierceness that surprised her.



"Hey, you coming up with a plan for world peace in there?" Danny knocked his knuckles against her head and she realized that she'd been woolgathering for a few minutes.

"So, you hoping to get any of them in the sack?" Louise said, jerking her head round to take in the rest of the Youth Across Continents students.

Danny frowned, thinking for a moment. "Well, you're gonna think this is weird," he said, "but there's something about Mary-Beth..."

Louise hit him hard enough in the stomach that he let out a whoosh of air and doubled over. "Asshole! I'm being serious."

He laughed, though his hands were still clutched to his stomach in pain. "Well you wouldn't kick 'em out of bed, but you wouldn't take 'em home to meet mom and dad either."

Louise felt vaguely reassured, though she knew that was stupid—he was far likelier to meet someone once he started school.

"How about you?" Danny asked.

"You've got to be kidding," she said.

Danny looked over at James and Peter. "No, I guess they're not really your type—you know, no criminal record."

Louise let that one slide as they'd finally made it to the subway, the entrance just a small archway over the intersection, marked with one of the old black and white signs that looked like they hadn't changed in years, like they and the panhandler and the trash were all exactly the same when Travis Bickle drove past them and wished for a real rain to come.

Just as they were about to descend, Danny halted in his tracks, so that Rinoka walking along behind almost bumped into him. "What?" Louise said to him impatiently, but when she looked into his face, she saw that it had gone suddenly sickly white beneath his healthy tan. She tried to pull him forward, but his feet remained stubbornly fixed to the ground.

"Did you see...?" he asked.

She looked around. "See what?" There was no one there but a few midday pedestrians, tourists gawping up at the towering Art Deco shape of the Empire State Building a couple of blocks away.

Danny shook his head, seeming to return to himself, though his face remained pale. "Nothing. Nothing." He carried on into the subway station, suddenly moving so quickly that Louise had to trot to keep up.

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Danny couldn't stop the feeling that something very bad was going to happen very soon. When he'd been walking down to the subway, he'd suddenly caught sight of a shadow on the wall in front of him that looked exactly like a train, hurtling to destruction against the bricks. It was only when he'd looked round after a moment of frozen fear that he'd seen what was causing the illusion, one of the many New York crazies wandering the streets with a board declaring "Repent Now. Tomorrow is Too Late." The shadow of the board formed the front of the train, the crazy man's wild tangle of yellow-gray hair the steam that seemed to emerge from its wrecked front end.

It was a shadow, just a shadow, but he felt like it had fallen over him, and previously innocent objects and people suddenly took on a sinister hue. He tried to pull himself together, headed towards the stairs with the others, but he felt like he was walking under water, moving only with enormous effort. Louise sent worried glances his way, sensing his mood. He ignored them, knowing that anything he could say would only make her more worried about him. She hadn't wanted to know about his strange vision or dream or hallucination or whatever it was on the ghost train and he didn't intend to tell her now.

But as soon as he stepped out of the light of day into the shadowy world of the subway, the dream returned with full intensity. He kept seeing, over and over, the moment when the torn-off doorway had ripped through Rinoka's body and the startled expression in her eyes as she'd looked down to see her own intestines coiling down onto the filthy floor of the vehicle. As the memory came back he found himself having to swallow back bile, very near to throwing up again like he'd done last night.

He looked up to realize that he'd reached the barrier and quickly fumbled a token out of his pocket and into the machine. But rather than sliding in, it seemed to jam the mechanism and he couldn't push his way through to join the others on the platform. Behind him, a big African-American guy had been following and now his body was blocking Danny's exit. Danny felt the bubble of fear inside him expand, his previous apprehension joined by a head-squeezing claustrophobia. The black guy backed off as soon as he saw that the gate was jammed, but the feeling didn't leave Danny.

And when he went to try the next barrier along, that one jammed too. His heart started to pound as he stared in incomprehension at the metal bar in front of him.

By now Louise had realized that he wasn't following her and came back to see what was up.

"Token's jammed in the barrier," Danny croaked through a suddenly dry throat.

"Jump over then," Louise ordered impatiently. "Come on, Danno, you're gonna miss the train."

She was right; he could hear it now, the sound of its engine echoing mournfully down the tunnel towards them. He hesitated, wondering if he should try the final barrier, but the thought that that one might jam up too scared him. If that happened, he wouldn't be able to deny that it was sending him some kind of message, that something didn't want him to board that train. Before he could think through the implications of that too carefully, he looked round to check that no one was watching, then vaulted over the low barrier and onto the platform. Once there, he saw the African-American man eyeing him disapprovingly. "Kids like you, shouldn't be allowed. Should all be taken out..." he muttered as he walked away.

Danny's heart was now pounding so hard against his ribcage that he thought it might break out, and his breath seemed to catch in his throat every time he drew it. His whole skin was covered in a cold flush of fear.

It took every ounce of his self-control just to stand there, waiting, while the train drew up. He could feel his feet, as if they had a mind

of their own, dragging him away, trying to pull him back to the barriers and the exit and the welcome light of day.

"You okay?" Louise asked him, as the huge silver bullet of the train slid to a stop in front of them.

He bit his lip and nodded, not trusting himself to speak, afraid that if he did all that would emerge would be a humiliating scream.

He could see that the whole length of the train was covered in graffiti, great sprawling curls and jagged lines in black and green and red. As the door to the last carriage slid open in front of him he saw that it had been sprayed with red paint, a tag he didn't recognize and beneath it, in a different script, the words "DIE MOTHERFUCKERS."

As soon as he read them, the panic cut off, as suddenly as if someone had flicked a switch. But he didn't feel better. Instead, he felt as if those last words had pushed him beyond the limit, into a cold, distant place where nothing really mattered very much. The world felt removed from him, like he was looking at it through a veil or a thick pane of glass.

Okay, okay, he told himself. It's just a panic attack. Mom used to have them whenever she had to fly. She had those classes and they went away and this will as well if I just keep telling myself that the dream wasn't real, that that stuff I saw just isn't going to happen. Calm, he repeated in his mind over and over, stay calm.

It seemed to work, though he still felt dazed, disconnected from reality. He drifted on board the train, smiling inanely at Louise to reassure her. The carriage was full, a mixture of tourists and out-of-towners and a few office workers heading in late, and though there were a couple of seats free Danny remained standing so that Mary-Beth and some of the girls could sit down. He grabbed the handhold and swayed with the motion of the train as it moved off, letting the gentle rocking motion lull him.

The air inside was chill, fiercely air-conditioned. He saw Louise pull on her sweater over her thin T-shirt, but Danny still felt hot, as if there was a fever coursing through his blood. He realized that he was sweating and wiped a hand across his forehead, then wiped it off on his khaki shorts.

Then, when he'd steeled himself, he looked around the carriage.

It doesn't look anything like my vision, he thought immediately. There was no Asian man listening to his music on a seat near him. Louise was sitting beside Mary-Beth not opposite her. James wasn't sitting at all.

See, he told himself, nothing to worry about. He felt the haze gradually lift from his vision, and his heartbeat returned to something like normal. He smiled over at Louise again, more naturally this time.

"Is something the matter?" Mary-Beth asked him and he could see in her face that she'd noticed his anxiety and was concerned for him.

He smiled at her as well, feeling almost giddy with relief. "I'm fine. Just feeling some after-effects from last night."

At the mention of the previous day's events, Mary-Beth's expression hardened. Her mouth set in a tight line and she nodded once, then looked away from him. But even this didn't dampen his spirits and he carried on smiling to himself, feeling suddenly elated to be alive.

When the train pulled into the next station, a whole bunch of people got off and Danny sank into the seat behind him with relief. Opposite him, he could see Peter and James doing the same.

As soon as she saw Danny sit, Louise hopped up and slid onto the bench-seat beside him.

His heart skipped a beat. "What are you doing?" he said, more aggressively than he'd intended.

Louise shook her head at him. "I thought you might like some company, but if you were hoping to make some new friends go right ahead." She nodded towards his left.

He turned to look.

A young Asian man had taken the seat beside him and was shaking open his copy of *The New York Times*. As Danny watched, he took an iPod out of his pocket, hooked the earphones round his neck, and pressed play. The tinny sound of "Crazy Train" by Ozzy Osbourne rang out into the air.

Danny felt like his head had been seized in a vice. He turned back to Louise, to see that she had shifted in her seat to pick up something

from behind her. It was a copy of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*.

"Someone must have left it behind," Louise said, idly flicking through the pages as Danny watched mutely, completely incapable of speech.

Then, finally, after several false starts, he managed to get his mouth working. "We're going to crash," he said. It was louder than he'd intended because several people around him turned to stare disapprovingly, including the Asian guy with the iPod.

Louise stared at him a moment, waiting for the punch line. "What?" she said eventually.

"A crash. We're going to crash. This train. This train is going to crash," Danny said urgently, his thoughts as fragmented as his speech. With a huge effort, he forced himself to speak coherently, convinced now beyond a shadow of a doubt that all their lives depended on it. "I saw it, Lou, in the ghost train. I saw a train crash and all of us dying and it was exactly like this. We've got to get off!"

He saw that Mary-Beth had heard him and was looking over, the earlier concern in her eyes deepening to real fear for him. But he wasn't going crazy, damn it! He'd seen what he'd seen and he didn't know how or why but he'd been given a glimpse of a terrible future and with it a chance to avert it and he was going to do everything in his power to stop it happening. Danny was more cautious than Louise, slower to make up his mind, but once he had he didn't mess around, just acted on instinct. And all his instincts were telling him that they had to get out of there, now.

"How?" Louise said to him, sounding worried about him rather than what he'd said. "The train's moving, I don't know about crashing but we'd die for sure if we tried to jump out. Anyway, when did you become clairvoyant?" She looked at him skeptically, clearly still half-suspecting that he was winding her up.

"Since last night," he said. "Since I saw us all dying on the ghost train."

His urgent tone didn't seem to get through to her at all. That was Louise all over. Push her in one direction and she'd pull as hard as she could in the other. "Then why didn't you say anything then?"

Louise said, eyes narrowed at him. "Hey, are you having that déjà vu shit where you think you've seen something already but really you're just imagining it?"

"They think it might be because the two halves of your brain are out of synch," James supplied, and Danny realized that the entire group sitting opposite had been listening in on him.

"I know what déjà vu is and this isn't it!" Danny shouted, giving up all attempts to be subtle about it. He saw a silver-haired old man stare at him from across the aisle. He looked alarmed, but scaring these people now was better than leaving them to die later. "I saw it, I don't know how, but I did. This whole ride, the conversation—and then the train stops, in the middle of a tunnel, and all the lights go out, and a couple of minutes later another train crashes into us and we all die."

"Are you sure you're feeling well?" James asked him, with more sarcasm than sympathy.

"For Christ's sake!" Danny shouted, desperate to convince them.

"Well, all right then," Bodil said, looking interested though not necessarily convinced. "What do we say next?"

Danny searched his memory, but the details of the crash itself were far clearer than their earlier words. Then he remembered and almost gasped with relief. "Your mother!" he said to Peter. "She's dead, isn't she?"

Peter looked shocked. Then a pained, closed-off expression settled over his thin face. "Yes, but you could easily have found that out."

Danny grabbed the copy of *Murder on the Orient Express* from Louise and waved it at Peter. He could feel the seconds ticking away on some internal clock, knew that he had very little time left. "But this was the book she was reading when she died. Right?"

Peter went terribly pale, but didn't reply.

"Right?" Danny shouted.

"Yes, that is right," Peter said after a moment, his voice a dry husk.

"You told us that right before we crashed," Danny said, his voice low and intense. He swept his gaze round to the others, willing them to believe, to listen to him. If they wouldn't he'd have to get Louise,

somehow, and go it alone. He wasn't going to sit through the deaths he'd seen, not again.

And it still wasn't clear if he had convinced them. Rinoka looked merely intrigued, as if this was some good story she was being told and wanted to hear the end of and Peter looked more shaken by the revelation about his mother than what it actually implied. James, typically, looked disdainful—though Danny could see a pulse leaping in his throat as fast as a hare in spring.

"I don't know..." Louise said slowly.

And then the train jerked to a halt and they were all thrown from their seats. The lights died, leaving the whole train in darkness. This time, though, Danny had been prepared, and he rolled with the fall and rose to his feet in one fluid motion.

"Over here!" he shouted, walking towards the door. Thank God he'd done enough wreck diving drills to be confident of navigating without light. "Come on, this way," he shouted. "We're got to get out now. There's only a minute left."

He thought he heard the others fumbling after him but he couldn't be sure over the screams and moans of the passengers and he didn't dare wait. He had to find the emergency release on the door.

After a heart-stopped moment fumbling in the dark, he found the catch and levered it open but the doors only opened four inches then stuck fast. He could see them now, as the red emergency lights flicked on, bathing everything in a demonic glow, the faces of his sister and the other students suddenly appearing beside him like a haunting. Desperately, he clawed his hands round the door, braced his feet against the floor and heaved. It moved an inch, maybe two, then jammed again.

"For fuck's sake help me!" he shouted back, and James moved up to add his strength to Danny's. Together, they heaved once, then again and finally the doors slid all the way open and a gust of dank tunnel air blew into the carriage.

"What the hell are you doing?" one of the other passengers shouted at him.

"I'm saving our lives!" Danny shouted back. The man continued to scream at him, that he'd make them all late, that the train would



never get into a station with the door open, that Danny must have lost his mind. Danny tuned it out. He wished he could remember exactly how much time they had left, but the vision had been dreamlike, divorced from the realities of minutes and seconds. Did they have minutes? Was it only seconds? It didn't matter, he knew, he could only do what he could do. Grabbing Louise, he pushed her roughly out of the door. She didn't protest, just landed lithely on the rails beneath them and held out her hand to help the next person down.

Danny hesitated a moment, primal fear urging him to run, run, forget about the others and just get himself and his sister the hell out of there before it was too late. But he tamped the impulse down ruthlessly and reached over for Mary-Beth, almost bodily lifting her out of the train in his panic. Bodil jumped down without any help, and then Rinoka, though he thought he heard her cry out when she landed. After that Peter, who shot him a swift questioning look before leaping into the blackness outside. Last of all was James—but he just stood there, looking uncertainly at Danny. "Really, are you sure about this?" he said.

Danny could feel his insides clenching with fear and a terrible rage at this stupid, arrogant English boy who wanted to kill them all. He knew that had barely seconds left, and still James hesitated in the doorway. "For God's sake, you've got to believe me!" Danny said to him, but he could see in James's eyes that he didn't.

The other passengers were watching them with alarm and annoyance, eyes glittering blackly in the red light. But one old guy, the white-haired man whom Danny had seen watching him earlier, suddenly stepped forward—and put his shoulder against James, pushing him out to land with a shocked gasp on the ground five feet below.

"I believe you," he said to Danny in a thick Borscht Belt accent. "Now help me down."

Not even pausing to think, Danny hoisted the old man under the armpits—he weighed less than a sparrow—and handed him down to Louise, then vaulted out and clear of the tracks. He landed awkwardly, catching his foot in some rubble, and he fell painfully to

his knees against some sharp rocks. He was up on his feet again before the pain had even registered.

"I can't believe you—" James said to the old man. Danny could see a cut on his face where he too must have landed awkwardly, scarlet blood flowing like tears down his cheeks.

"He saved your life so shut the fuck up!" Danny snapped. James backed down immediately, shocked by Danny's uncharacteristically aggressive tone.

And then they all heard it, the sound of another engine, another train, heading up the track towards them.

"Oh shit," Bodil said.

"This way!" Danny shouted, spinning to sprint down the track, away from that lethal noise. The others hardly needed telling. He could see the panic in their eyes, the animal urge to escape danger. They ceased to be individual and became a herd, mindlessly stampeding down the tunnel. The gap between the train and the wall wasn't wide, and for a moment they barely moved, everyone getting in everyone else's way, pushing and shoving, so desperate to get out that they didn't care if everyone else died, as long as they made it, the survival imperative as basic and selfish as evolution. Danny felt an elbow slam into his cheek and didn't know if it was Rinoka's or Peter's or even Louise's. He felt a horrible claustrophobia, as if the walls of the tunnel themselves were pressing in on him, impeding his escape.

Then, after what seemed like an eternity, but could only have been a few seconds, they broke past the end of the train and into empty space. Danny saw that Louise was right beside him, and he grabbed her wrist, determined to save her if no one else. Ahead of him, he could see the old man helping Mary-Beth as she stumbled, and to his side Peter, James and Bodil were sprinting, stumbling over the rough floor but keeping going, getting up as soon as they fell, putting as much distance between themselves and the growing roar of the other train as they could.

Danny gasped for breath, his heart straining so hard he thought it might burst, but he began to believe that they were going to make it, that they'd moved far enough to escape the worst of the crash.

And then he realized that Rinoka wasn't with them. For a second, just a second, he considered pretending he hadn't thought this and just carrying on running because, after all, what could he do for her now? But he just couldn't do it.

Pushing Louise forward, shouting "Carry on!" he spun on his heel and looked back towards the dark hulk of their own train and the as yet invisible twin which would soon destroy it. In the near total darkness, it took him a heart-stopping second to pick out Rinoka's form, a blacker shadow against the gray. She was limping towards him, far too slowly. She must have hurt her ankle when she jumped from the train. He hesitated, rooted to the spot, willing her on but knowing that if he went back to help her he'd achieve nothing except endangering his own life too.

And then, just when he'd stopped expecting it, the other train hit—metal smashing against metal, grinding down the brick walls of the tunnel in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. The noise was so overwhelming that he felt the force wave of it pushing him back, away from Rinoka, away from the carnage behind her. There must have been screams, cries of distress and fear from inside the train, but they were lost in the overwhelming auditory assault of the crash itself. He clamped his hands over his ears, sinking to his knees in pain, but the sound was all around him, echoing in his chest cavity even when it couldn't find its way in through his ears.

Rinoka, amazingly, kept to her feet, still struggling away from the crash and towards the too distant safety of Danny's position.

And, behind her, something huge and deadly was following, the great bulk of the train thrusting towards her, propelled by the force of the collision. It grated along the track behind her, blazing with red and orange flames, like a vast demon pursuing one last lost soul. He could see her clearly now, outlined in fire. Her face was streaked with tears. Her mouth was open in a scream, but the noise of it was lost, like all the others, in the cacophony of death behind her. Even though he could see in her face that it was agonizing for her, she managed to run faster, flinging herself forward, her ankle twisting and flapping in ways it was never meant to, threatening to pitch her onto her face.

But however fast she ran, the train moved faster, foot by foot closing the distance between them. Rinoka was still twenty feet from Danny when the train slid grindingly forward to a mere inch behind her back. The heat of the scorching metal burned into her flesh and he saw her blouse catch fire, spiralling away from her body in glowing embers of material to be lost in the vast inferno behind her. Her hair was like a halo of flame. But still she kept running.

And then, incredibly, she began to pull ahead. The train was slowing down. She was going to make it.

When Rinoka was two feet away from Danny she finally fell to her knees. He could see her gasping for breath and the vicious red and white marks on her skin where it had bubbled and burnt in the intense heat. Across Rinoka's shoulders the fabric of her burning blouse had fused with her skin and her head was a bare, bloody dome, the hair of her pigtails just flakes of soot, spiraling into the tunnel behind her. She'd never again be the pretty party girl he'd first met. But she was alive. And behind her, the train had finally spent its vast momentum and ground to a halt.

Danny took his hands away from his ears and rose to his feet, still not quite believing that it was over.

And then he saw it.

Hurtling from the end of the train, something gray and sharp was spinning through the air towards Rinoka. As if it really were a demon, filled with malevolent intent and unwilling to give its victim any reprieve, the train was sending out one last killing stroke towards the helpless Japanese girl.

But Danny was damned if he was going to let it kill her after all that. He shouted out a desperate warning, but he couldn't hear his own voice, his ears numbed from the earlier overload. He could tell that she hadn't heard it either because she remained kneeling on the ground, arms wrapped around herself, rocking slowly backwards and forwards like someone whose mind had snapped.

The metal missile was only ten feet from her back. He could see what it was now, the torn remains of one of the train's metal side panels, its edges jagged and lethally sharp. And he suddenly knew that if it reached Rinoka it would slice right through her, cut her in

half exactly as he'd seen in his vision and her terrified eyes would watch as her own guts spilled out onto the tracks.

With a cry of rage, or maybe fear, he hurled himself towards her, jumping off the ground, flinging his own body—he suddenly realized—into the path of the huge metal blade. I don't even like her that much, he thought as he flew through the air and the metal shard flew towards him and then he connected with Rinoka with a bone-jarring thud and his momentum took them both sideways. The metal chunk sped past them, so close that he could feel the wind of its passage and he saw a lock of his hair float gently to the ground where the metal had cut clean through it.

And then the metal thumped into the brick wall of the tunnel, embedding itself five inches deep to hang, vibrating, above the tracks. And Rinoka hit the ground with Danny on top of her, letting out an agonized cry of pain. But she was still alive and so was he.

After a second, he levered himself off her and sat back on his haunches. He stared down into her dark almond eyes, which looked dazed with pain. He thought that he ought to say something, but couldn't think of a single word. And in the end he just laughed, because Jesus Christ, that kind of thing doesn't happen every day.

# FIVE

Ambulances took them to the hospital, screaming through the dense Manhattan traffic, even though amazingly no one but Rinoka seemed seriously hurt. Of those who'd been on the train itself very few had survived, but Danny didn't ask too much about them because he couldn't have saved everyone so why should he feel guilty about those left behind?

Louise sat beside Danny in the back of their ambulance, surrounded by the antiseptic white walls and gleaming steel implements of modern medicine. She held his hand, but she wouldn't meet his eye as the ambulance crew checked out her blood pressure and her vitals and all that stuff even though it was pretty obvious that the only thing either of them was suffering from was shock. Eventually, she looked up at him. He was alarmed to see how haunted her eyes looked. It was an especially shocking expression on his carefree sister, who never let anything get to her too much and who always seemed to thrive on danger—to grow stronger and happier the longer she was exposed to it.

"So, back to the hospital," she said. "It's getting to be like our second home." Her tone was light but strained, only going through the motions of joking.

"Maybe they'll name a ward after us," he joked back, just as weakly.

She nodded then suddenly clenched her fists and glared right into his eyes. "How did you know, Danno?" she said. "How the hell did you know?"

He saw the paramedic's head jerk slightly towards him and it occurred to him for the first time that this was a question he was going to get asked a lot and that not everyone might believe his answer.

"I told you," he said to Louise. "I saw it, on the ghost train."

"A premonition, you mean?" She said premonition like it was a dirty word.

Danny shrugged. "Well, yeah, I guess."

Louise stared at him. "Since when did you sign up to the Psychic Friends Network?"

Danny was startled by the hostility in her voice. It was almost as if she blamed him for the accident. But after a second she dropped her eyes to her hands, clasped so tightly in her lap that her knuckles were white. "Sorry, sorry," she mumbled. "I'm just shaken up."

Danny was tempted to respond that how the hell did she think he felt, but he let it lie and they sat in silence for the rest of the journey. Her silence gave Danny time to go over and over the events of the last day in his mind, but no matter how many times he ran through them, they didn't make any more sense. How had he known about the train crash? It wasn't even as if he'd had a vague premonition, a sense of impending doom which had caused him to lead everyone on their miraculous escape. He'd known exactly what was going to happen, down to the headline on the newspaper the Asian guy had been reading. It was like he'd seen the future.

Did it really matter, though? For some reason—God or karma or whatever—he'd been granted a chance to avert a horrible fate. He'd done it, they were all safe and now he needed to just put it behind him and move on. Whatever it was, he told himself, it was over now.

Except that, as he thought this, he remembered something else, a sudden vivid flashback of the chunk of metal flying towards Rinoka as she knelt helpless on the tracks and his strange, unquestioning knowledge that if it hit her it would kill her in exactly the same way as the death he'd foreseen for her in his vision.

At that moment, the ambulance shot under a bridge and the interior was plunged into a sudden darkness. Danny shivered, wondering if it was really over at all.

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Peter sat a little apart from Bodil, wanting some privacy, although it wasn't as if she looked like she was craving conversation either. He knew the others—who'd all needed at least some medical attention—would be back soon. As for him: "You're in shock," a nice young Chinese doctor had told him, and he supposed he was, although in

his head he felt as if he was thinking more clearly than ever. The train crash and the events preceding it, kept playing over and over in his head, crystal clear, every detail of the scene absolutely pin sharp.

He could see the black and red paint of the graffiti on the side of the train blistering under the heat of the fires raging inside it and, even more clearly, the skin on Rinoka's shoulders and back bubbling and blistering under the same heat.

But more clearly than anything he saw the faces of the other passengers in the train with them, the ones who hadn't got off. He couldn't believe how well he could picture them; as if they were people he'd known all his life. He saw the Asian man who'd been sitting beside Danny, a pair of thin wire glasses slid half down his nose so that the red indentation where they'd normally rest was clearly visible. He'd been shuffling and swaying, unconsciously moving to the rhythm of the music emerging from his iPod.

And then there'd been a pair of girls, pretty and blonde, maybe sisters, talking and giggling together by the doors. He'd thought at the time—with typical teenage paranoia—that they'd been laughing at him. Now he could picture exactly how their eyes had flicked to Danny as they talked and he realized that they'd been egging each other on to start up a conversation with the good-looking American boy.

There'd been the old lady, as dry and frail as a moth, perched on a seat to his left, quietly knitting the tiniest white bootie. For her grandchild, he thought, or maybe even great-grandchild.

And there'd been the mother, her baby resting against her chest in a papoose, cooing down into his sleeping face and lovingly wiping away the tiny bubbles of drool that gathered at the corner of his little Cupid's bow mouth.

He'd seen them all again, after the accident, but only as the paramedics had zipped them into body bags. Although he'd been far too young to remember it, he had a sudden, vivid mental image of his own mother's funeral. From the first moment of his life, other people had been dying in his place.

"Are you okay?" Bodil said to him.



He realized that his hands were clenched into fists. His breath was coming out in short gasps. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, very much afraid he might cry if he did.

Why had he been saved and not them? If God had sent Danny a vision, and Peter couldn't think of any other explanation for it, then why had they been chosen? Were they supposed to have helped the others? When Peter had heard and believed, Danny's warning, why hadn't he tried to persuade the others to leave too? Wouldn't that have been the right, the Christian thing to do? The questions echoed round and round in his head, endlessly, but the only answers he could come up with were ones he didn't want to believe.

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James winced as the somber-faced African-American doctor pushed the last stitch into his cheek.

"Feeling any pain?" the doctor asked.

James shook his head. His entire cheek was numb from the local anesthetic they'd given him and he couldn't feel a thing but he hated needles anyway. He didn't think he'd admit that to the doctor, though, not when he'd been dealing with so many more serious injuries from the crash. James had seen some of them wheeled into the hospital as they'd arrived, young women with legs torn off and glazed eyes, men with pieces of shrapnel still embedded in them and many more who were DOA. It had been carnage on the train. James knew he was very, very lucky only to have to worry about a few stitches in his cheek.

Luck. That was certainly the comfortable way to think about it. But he knew that it was intellectually dishonest and that was one thing he'd always told himself he'd never be. But for God's sake, what else could you call it? A vision? A premonition? James had spent his entire life despising all the hippy new-age mumbo jumbo that his parents swallowed wholesale. Could it be that they were right after all that?

No. No, it couldn't. It was just a coincidence. Danny had had his... hallucination and then the crash had happened, and by a remarkable

coincidence they'd been the same. But how many times had Danny, or anyone else in their party, had dreams or drunken visions and they hadn't come true? Hundreds, thousands. It was undeniably unsettling that James happened to have been around on the one occasion in a billion when a dream did coincide with reality, but it was no more significant than the fact that the conditions in the universe happened to coincide exactly with the ones necessary to sustain life. If they didn't, there wouldn't be any life around to marvel at the perfect symmetry of it and wonder if it was proof of God's existence. And if Danny hadn't happened to have that one-in-a-billion vision then James wouldn't be around to marvel at it either. Satisfied that he'd explained it adequately, James closed his eyes and tried not to think about the needle digging through the numb flesh of his cheek.

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Bodil had tried to talk to Peter, but he was lost in a world of his own. She thought about forcing him to open up, since he was clearly going through some kind of inner turmoil, but then she realized that that would mean him opening up to her and she'd have to be sympathetic and say the right things and so she decided to let it lie.

Now that the whole thing was over, she felt elated, almost light-headed with euphoria. The doctors had said it was shock but what did they know? She'd stared death in the face and told it to fuck off. And what's more, she had definite, undeniable proof that the paranormal existed. She couldn't wait to tell her parents about it. It occurred to her that she maybe ought to call them now since they'd probably seen the crash on the news and might be worried about her. But since that would involve them spending a second actually thinking about her she decided it wasn't very likely and she'd be better off saving the cost of a phone call.

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Mary-Beth sat in silence as the doctors prodded and poked at her. She'd told them repeatedly that there was nothing wrong with her

but because she was old they'd clearly decided she didn't know what she was talking about and had elected to give her the most thorough medical they knew how. Probably worried that I'll sue them, she thought with uncharacteristic sourness.

"Is there any pain?" Dr McGee asked her for the tenth time as she prodded her stomach, a little crease of concentration between her carefully plucked eyebrows.

"No there isn't, there or anywhere else on my gosh-darned body and I'd be grateful if you'd let me go back to doing my job!" Mary-Beth snapped. She bit down on her lip, surprised at herself, but the words were out there and too late to take back.

"I'm only trying to help you," Dr McGee said stiffly.

"I know, honey. I'm sorry." Mary-Beth patted a curl of her gray hair back into place and tried to think out the next sentence rather than let it just fly out of her mouth willy-nilly—something she was always advising her young charges to do. "It's just that I'm responsible for a school party and I'm worried about how the youngsters will be coping with all of this."

Dr McGee looked at her intently, suddenly—Mary-Beth thought—seeing her as a human being rather than a job. "You were with that bunch of students, the ones who survived the crash?"

"That's right," Mary-Beth replied cautiously.

"Wow." The young doctor's eyes widened. "I heard that you got off the train because one of the students had a vision."

Mary-Beth looked at Dr McGee and knew instantly that whatever she told her would be all round the hospital and quite possibly the whole city by the end of the day. Her protective instincts instantly sprang into action. Danny would have a hard enough time of it without people like Dr McGee gossiping about him to all and sundry. "He just had a bad feeling, that's all. I reckon he might have heard the other train coming, subliminally and that's what sparked him to get us off there."

"Oh," McGee said, sounding disappointed, and returned to her examination.

It occurred to Mary-Beth that that was exactly the story Danny ought to tell to the police, who had said they wanted to interview

them after they'd all been seen to. It would save any awkward questions and anyway, who was to say that it wasn't the truth?

When the examination was finally over, she decided that her first priority was to pay Rinoka a visit. But when she got there the doctors told her that though the girl was stable she'd suffered quite a severe trauma and they didn't want her disturbed just yet. She gave the intern her contact details at the hotel and he promised to get a message to her just as soon as Rinoka was well enough for visitors. Still, she resolved to return later, once she'd taken the others back to the hotel and settled them in. She didn't think they'd be playing hooky again after the events of the day.

Finally, she navigated her way through the featureless white corridors of the hospital back towards the reception area. She found herself drawing a deep breath as she approached it, bracing herself to deal with the children's shock and fear and consciously putting her own aside. To her surprise, she discovered that she was dreading seeing Danny again most of all. He'd saved her life, all of their lives. But she just didn't know what she was going to say to him.

\*\*\*

When Danny and Louise got to the hospital and they realized that he'd been in to see them only the day before, they immediately insisted on giving him a total physical. Danny kept trying to tell them it was a waste of time, that the only reason he'd come in the night before was because he'd been drinking for seven solid hours, but they ignored his protests.

For once, Louise didn't side with him. "Let them do their job, Danno," she said, still not quite meeting his eye. She seemed pleased when they asked her to stay outside the room while they conducted their examination. He wondered for a moment if she was hoping that they'd isolate the source of his vision, a small polyp or growth somewhere on his body maybe. Then they could surgically remove it and she'd have her good old normal brother back who didn't do scary things like predict an accident he couldn't possibly have seen coming and save everyone's lives.

Danny let out a small bitter laugh at the thought and the doctor who was examining him—a short, dark-haired guy who couldn't have been older than thirty, with a beaky nose and an impatient twist to his mouth—looked him curiously in the eye.

"Everything all right?" the doctor asked.

Danny flushed. "Yeah, sorry. Just, you know, thinking..."

The doctor smiled, suddenly looking a lot more human. "Oh, that's never a good idea." Then the doctor's expression became more serious and Danny's heart sank. "You were the guy who took those others off that train, right?"

Danny nodded, looking away.

"Must have shaken you up pretty badly," the doctor continued. "You know... if you need someone to talk to, the hospital can arrange it for you. It'll be covered by your insurance."

Danny felt a sudden flush of anger. He'd saved everyone's lives and instead of getting thanked he was being treated like a freak. He glared hotly at the doctor. "I'm not crazy, you know!"

The doctor smiled again. This one wasn't at all friendly. It was the smile you used when you were trying to calm someone who seemed dangerously unstable. "I know. I'm not suggesting that you are. I just —"

"I mean, it actually happened! I saw the accident and it happened. It wasn't just some hallucination."

The doctor nodded thoughtfully. "So you're saying you're clairvoyant." He said it the way a psychiatrist would say, "So you think you're Napoleon."

"I'm not—" Danny began heatedly, then he cut himself off and shut his eyes wearily. "I don't want to talk about it, okay? I don't want to talk to you about it. I don't want to talk to anyone else about it. It's over. It's finished."

He opened his eyes, expecting to see a look of pity or concern on the doctor's face and instead saw that he wasn't looking at him at all. He was looking over Danny's shoulder, his expression puzzled. Danny looked round, and found himself face to face with a young woman, not much older than him, but dressed in the standard doctor's scrubs. The first thing he noticed was that she was very

pretty. Her hair was long and strawberry blonde, held away from her face in a tight ponytail. Her eyes were that almost unnatural emerald green that you only ever found in redheads. Her mouth was rich and pulpy, softer than anything else on her face.

The second thing he noticed was that she was staring at him as if he was the most horrifying thing she'd ever seen.

"What's the matter?" he said after a moment, when it seemed like she might stand there staring at him forever.

Her mouth worked for several seconds before anything came out. Finally, she said, "You're supposed to be dead." As soon as she said it, her face lost its petrified expression and a look of intense shame came over it as she seemed to realize what she'd just said.

Danny felt all the blood drain out of his own face. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, nothing," she said, sounding frantic. "Oh God, I'm sorry."

"Kate..." the other doctor said, his voice angry and disapproving.

She shook her head—then turned on her tail and fled.

The doctor looked back at Danny, his expression apologetic. "Don't worry about it," he said, "she's obviously distressed."

Danny shook his head, his hands twisted in his lap. "Why not? It's true, isn't it?"

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Rinoka was bored. She was in some pain, too, but that wasn't as bad as the boredom. Lying in a hospital bed definitely wasn't why she'd come to New York and although at first she'd been pleased to have such a great story—the crash, the near-death, the rescue—to tell to her friends when she got back, she'd soon begun to realize that that might be the only story she had to tell because they were very unlikely to let her out of this hospital any time before her flight. On the plus side, they'd been pumping her full of morphine since she'd arrived and she was feeling as high as a kite.

One of the nurses was fussing around her now, fiddling with the tube they'd inserted into the vein in the crook of her elbow. It was

through this they were pushing the pain killer straight into her blood stream and it was making her seriously reconsider her vow never to take anything that required shooting up. The nurse suddenly loomed over her, her face an oval of pink perched on a severe white linen base.

"Hey," Rinoka said to her, smiling. "How are you doing?"

The nurse smiled awkwardly back. "Don't say anything, you need to keep your face still. Just try to get some rest."

Rinoka had a hazy recollection of something surrounding her head, her neck, her shoulders. Something burning hot.. She tried to focus in on the memory, but the thoughts were carried away on a tide of painkillers, fading to a gentle murmur of disquiet. She lifted her hand towards her face, and realized for the first time that it was swaddled in a white roll of bandage. When she touched her cheek with it, she thought she felt more bandages there. She pressed down experimentally against them and a wave of agonizing pain washed through her, bursting through the layers of insulation provided by the morphine.

"What happened to me?" she asked the nurse, with a tremor in her voice.

Rinoka sometimes found Caucasian faces hard to read and her vision was graying in and out ever since she'd touched her cheek, but she thought the nurse looked uncomfortable.

"Why don't you rest up?" she said again. "I'll get the doctor in to speak to you as soon as he's free."

Rinoka felt the beginnings of a muzzy panic breaking to the surface of her thoughts. What was the matter with her? What was so wrong that this nurse was afraid to tell her? She lifted her bandaged hand again to touch her cheek, as gently as possible this time, and as she did she had a sudden flashback to kneeling on the rubble-strewn floor of the train tunnel, her blouse blazing around her like a Roman candle, little sparks flying up, catching her—her hair! She shifted her hand round towards the back of her head, but all she could feel were more bandages.

"Please," she said to the nurse, her voice now even more shaky. "Could I have a mirror please?"

A brief look of distress crossed the nurse's face before she managed to school her expression into something more professional and neutral. "I'll get the doctor in to speak to you," she repeated, then hurried out of the door. Because she was in such a hurry, she didn't notice that she'd left a tray of suture instruments including a wickedly sharp scalpel—sitting unsteadily on the edge of Rinoka's bedside table.

Rinoka didn't notice either. She continued to prod at her face, trying to work out its new contours by touch, ignoring the stabs of pain each touch of her fingers brought.

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The others were all waiting for Danny and Louise in the ER reception when they returned. He barely spared them a glance, the pretty young doctor's words echoing round and round in his head: "you're supposed to be dead, you're supposed to be dead, you're supposed to be dead..." It didn't feel as if there was room for any other thoughts in there. But as soon as she saw him, Mary-Beth approached and took him by the arm, darting glances to left and right like a conspirator.

"Sugar, there's something I need to say to you. To all of you," she added, raising her voice slightly, then darting another guilty look around.

"Yeah?" Danny said when the others had all gathered in a huddle round Mary-Beth—though none of them, he noticed, quite touched him, even Louise.

"I've, well, I've always been a big believer in honesty," Mary-Beth began. Danny could hear the strain in her voice and he guessed the words were costing her something to say. "But you know the saying, discretion is the better part of valor. Well, you're all going to be talking to the police before we leave here." She darted another glance to the door, where uniformed officers were indeed waiting to interview the few survivors.

"You want us to lie to the police?" Peter's voice was high and incredulous. Danny glanced at his face, white beneath his short-



cropped hair, and thought it looked haunted. Join the club, buddy, he thought.

"No, of course not!" Mary-Beth said. "I want you to..." She looked over at Danny. Her eyes were bloodshot and rheumy, betraying all of her seventy-odd years.

"You want me to lie," Danny said.

Mary-Beth shook her head, but less definitely. "I don't want you to do anything. I just think, maybe, for your own sake... Well, you might not want to say so much about that vision of yours."

There was a silence when she used the word "vision," as if someone had said "fuck" at a Daughters of the American Revolution tea party.

"Right," Danny said bitterly after the silence had stretched for a few seconds. "Wouldn't want to frighten them or anything."

"Oh, honey," Mary-Beth said sadly, putting her hand on his arm, and he suddenly felt ashamed of his tone. Her expression was filled with nothing but sympathy. "I'm just looking out for you. If you go talking about visions, or hallucinations, or whatever the heck it was—well, it might not be so good for you. They might think—"

"I'm insane?" Danny asked, more quietly, and everyone around him looked away, as if he'd said another curse word.

"Involved," Mary-Beth said firmly. "No one thinks you're crazy. You saw what you saw and you saved all our lives and we're all grateful. As far as I'm concerned it was a gift from God and I'll be on my knees thanking him for it tonight."

Danny saw Peter flinch when Mary-Beth mentioned God. The German boys eyes looked suddenly damp with unshed tears.

"But I don't think all of New York's finest have the same faith in the Almighty," Mary-Beth continued. "And if they don't believe it was a vision which guided you, they're likely to think it's something more sinister. That maybe you had something to do with causing the crash."

"I get you," Danny said, his throat suddenly dry. He hadn't even thought of that possibility, but now he did he knew that Mary-Beth was absolutely right. From the expressions on the others' faces he could see that they hadn't thought of it either. Louise looked at him,

scared and Bodil bit her lip in consternation. But he could see that James was looking at him with a new, wary consideration in his eyes and he knew that the British boy was wondering if what Mary-Beth had suggested might actually be the truth. Well, fuck him.

"So, what do you think I should do?" he asked Mary-Beth.

"It's up to you, of course, but if I were you I might tell them that I just had a bad feeling," she said. "I might tell them that, looking back on it, I realize now that I must have been hearing the noise of the other train, somewhere in the back of my mind and that I reacted to it before I even knew what it was."

Louise breathed out a relieved sigh through her nose. "Yeah, yeah, that's it Danny! I mean, it's not just an excuse. I bet that was what really happened." As soon as she'd been offered an alternative explanation for her brother's unsettling behavior, Louise's face brightened, unfurling from its clenched anxiety like a flower at dawn.

James too looked relieved, as if this was an explanation he could accept.

"But what about—" Bodil began.

Louise spun round angrily to confront her, cutting her off. "He only thought he had the same vision on the ghost train. All that happened there was he was wasted and he got scared but when we were stuck in the tunnel it reminded him of that and his brain kind of, kind of latched onto that as a way of warning him that some serious fucked-up shit was about to go down." Her voice accelerated as she spoke, gaining speed as she put together the pieces of her argument, or to stop anyone else from interrupting her and trying to undermine it. She turned bright eyes on Danny. "Isn't that right?"

Danny didn't have the heart to contradict her. "Yeah, that's what I'll tell them," he said.

Louise grinned, either not noticing or choosing to ignore the fact that he hadn't really answered the question.

"Well, I guess I'd better get it over with," he said. He had just started to walk towards the police officers, when his eyes caught a familiar face across the large room. It was the doctor he'd seen earlier, the one who'd told him he should have been dead. Although he'd only seen her for a few moments, her pale slightly freckled face

had been seared onto his memory. Even if it hadn't been, the expression on her face when she saw him would have confirmed that it was her. She froze, her eyes wide and scared, as if she could see something other than what was in the room. And then he realized that she wasn't really looking at him. Her eyes were flicking over the whole group.

He swiveled round, changing direction, and in three quick strides he reached her and grabbed her arm, forcing her eyes to meet his. "We were all meant to die, right?" he said. "That's what you think, isn't it?"

"How...?" she said, blinking as her gaze seemed to return to the present. Finally, her emerald eyes locked with his, and her expression grew carefully controlled. "No," she said, trying to disguise the shake in her voice, "that was a terrible thing to say and I apologize."

"Do you know who I am?" Danny asked her. "Do you know why I'm in here?"

She stepped back, pulling her arm out of his grasp, but she didn't try to move away. "No, I don't."

"I, we, all of us, were in that train crash that happened earlier."

"Really?" Her eyes glanced over him again and then at the others standing a few paces away and looking across at them curiously. He knew what she was thinking: if they'd been in that crash, how come they were walking out of here with barely a scratch on them?

"Yeah," he said grimly. "We would have died in that crash, if I hadn't got us out of the train before the other one hit."

"Oh," she said, her eyes widening. He could tell that she'd heard about him. He imagined the story had done the rounds of the entire hospital by now.

"But you didn't know that when you saw me," he said. "So how did you know I was meant to be dead?" He fixed his gaze on her, daring her to look away.

He could see the careful calculation in her green eyes as she thought out her answer. "I didn't," she said eventually. "I've been... I've not been sleeping very well, and when I saw you, you... you reminded me of another patient of mine I've been seeing who died

recently. It just shook me up, that's all." Her voice became stronger, more confident as the story progressed.

"Bullshit," he said. She flinched, and he softened his tone. If she was going through anything like what he'd been going through—if she'd been having visions too, as he'd begun to suspect—then he knew that the last thing she needed was some aggressive asshole shouting at her. "Listen," he said. "I'm not angry. I just want to know what made you say it, that's all."

She shook her head, her face shadowed. "No, you don't," she said.

Danny sighed and pushed his hands wearily back through his hair. It was still full of rock dust from the crash and a greasy residue that he suddenly realized with a sickening lurch was the fat that had burnt off Rinoka's body in the white-hot fire of the explosion. His entire body must be infused with the smell, but as with many unpleasant things, overexposure had made him tune it out.

"I do. I really do," he told her. "You see, I had a vision, I saw the crash before it happened, and that's why I got us out. It's like you said, I should I be dead, we all should. So, please, just tell me how you knew. Because I feel like I'm going crazy here and I'd really appreciate any help you can give me."

He gave her his best smile, the one he used on coach whenever he'd messed up a race and it looked like he was going to ream him a new one.

It seemed to work, because she smiled tentatively back. He wasn't sure, but he thought that maybe she looked relieved. Maybe, like him, she was desperate to find someone else who understood what he was going through, who might even be able to help explain it. "Okay," she said, "the reason I said it was—"

"Kate!" a stern voice interrupted.

She spun round to face the tall man with iron-gray hair who'd walked up behind her. "Dr Curtis," she said. From the deference in her voice, Danny guessed that this was someone high up in the hospital.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," the man said to Danny, not sounding sorry at all, "but I'd like a private word with Miss Shelley if I may."

Danny hesitated a moment, but it was clear it wasn't really a request. "Sure," he said, then added to Kate, "we're staying in the Murray Hill Hostel on thirty-second. My name's Danny, Danny King, you can get hold of me there. Or my cell number's five, five, five, three, two, eight, six. Call me."

She looked worriedly at the older doctor, who had watched the exchange with disapproval. "Okay," she said, but she didn't look him in the eye and he couldn't tell if she meant it.

"My office," the other man said, then turned and strolled away with Kate trotting obediently at his heels. She didn't look around once, but Danny's eyes tracked her all the way out of the room. For the first time since he'd ridden the ghost train, and certainly since the crash, he felt his spirits lifting. There was someone else in the world who understood. And while she might be too scared to look him up, he now knew her name and he knew where to find her.

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Andrew had been in the hospital two months now, his body gradually eaten away by the cancer that was treating his internal organs like some kind of goddamned quick-grow solution. He'd learnt a few things over the course of the disease. He'd learnt that pain, no matter how continuous, never stops being painful. He'd learnt that having to take a shit with someone else's help and then have them wipe your ass for you was just about the most humiliating experience a man could go through. And he'd learnt that, on the other hand, having a hot young nurse help you into a bath and wash you down if you needed it made at least a little bit of the pain and humiliation worthwhile.

It was bath time again now. The doctor—a little redheaded girl—had been in a few minutes earlier to give him some injection or other, and now the nurse came in to help him into the bathroom. She was small, Chinese, with squinched together features. Not really his type but beggars couldn't be choosers. As she undressed him, he felt the first faint stirrings of desire, though his dick showed no sign of it—that had all ended a long time ago.

Once he was in the water, she released him to lie back against the enamel wall of the bath. It was a little cold and it made him realize that the water too wasn't quite at the temperature that he liked it. It wasn't helped by the chill breeze blowing through the room from some invisible source.

"Any chance of some more hot, sweetie?" he asked the nurse, shocked anew—as he was every time—by the faint rasp his voice had become.

"Sure thing," she said, smiling at him. She'd gotten friendlier the sicker he'd got, he noticed. He was no threat to her now, he supposed, not too likely to leap up and try to force himself on her in his condition, so she could afford to risk giving him the wrong idea.

She turned the faucet and he felt the gush of warmth spreading through the water and into the crevices of his horribly bloated, fish-belly white body. He might be dying young, but he sure as hell wasn't gonna leave a beautiful corpse.

"I'll be back to check on you in a minute," the nurse said. "I've got to change Mr O'Shaunessy's drip." She slipped out of the door with a last smile.

Andrew leant his head back against the bath, luxuriating in the sensation of floating, a temporary escape from the mortal weight of his decaying flesh. His eyes started to drift shut, sleep claiming him as it did so often now. He liked to think this was what death would be like. Like in the poems he'd read in high school. Just a last, never-ending sleep.

The water was still running but that didn't matter. The nurse would come in and turn it off soon.

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Kate had guessed as soon as she saw Dr Curtis's face that it wasn't good news, and she was absolutely right. As soon as she entered his office, the corner suite reserved for the Chief Resident, he sat down in the big leather chair behind his desk, steepled his fingers and studied her with cold impassivity. "Sit down, Kate," he said, nodding at the stiff-backed wooden chair opposite him.

Kate did as he asked. "Look, if this is about..." she began, but then realized that it might be unwise to finish the sentence. What if she mentioned telling the old man he was going to get shot and instead he had asked her in here to talk about what she'd said to that boy, Danny? She'd have incriminated herself further and unnecessarily. Or what if it was about something else entirely and no one even knew the crazy, unprofessional things she'd been saying to some of the patients? What, she suddenly thought with a stab of fear, if they'd found out about the Sux racing? She shut her mouth tightly, realizing that this meeting might be very important indeed, that her whole future could depend on it, and she had to play it absolutely right.

"Go on," Dr Curtis said after a moment. His desk was covered in teetering stacks of papers, framing him between white columns like an ancient Greek sculpture. Even his eyes, reflecting the neon lights of the room back at her, looked as blank as a statue's.

She shook her head. "No, nothing."

Dr Curtis grimaced. "But it isn't nothing, is it? Because I've been hearing some very disturbing things about your behavior over the last couple of days."

"Really?" Kate swallowed. "What kinds of things?"

Curtis narrowed his eyes, staring at her for a second as if trying to decide whether she was playing a game. "One of our patients has issued a formal complaint," he said eventually. "Apparently you told him, and I quote," he looked down at a piece of paper in front of him and slipped on some reading glasses, "that he was going to be shot." He looked back up at her again, over the rim of his glasses. "Is that true?"

Kate hesitated for a second, but it was clear that there was no point denying it. "Yes, it is. But—"

"You do realize, I hope," Curtis cut her off, "that aside from being an extremely unprofessional, and frankly disturbing thing to say, this leaves us wide open to a malpractice suit from Mr Forelli."

"Yes, I see." Kate realized that she was chewing a strand of her hair, a nervous habit she'd had since childhood. She hurriedly pulled it out of her mouth. "I'm very sorry, Dr Curtis, I—"

"I don't want an apology!" he suddenly roared, slapping the table in front of him so hard that one of the piles of paper gently toppled over. "I want to know what the hell it is you thought you were doing!"

To her horror, Kate realized that tears were beginning to well in her eyes. She fought them back and tried to speak past the lump in her throat. "I don't know," she whimpered.

As quickly as his rage had arrived it seemed to dissipate. He leaned forward in his chair and looked at her with an expression that was suddenly full of compassion. "I know how hard it is, you know, being a med student, coping with the pressures of studying as well as working here, your first real experience of pain and death. It can be unsettling for anyone."

At the unexpected sympathy, Kate lost all her hard-won control and tears began leaking out of her eyes to fall hotly down her cheeks. "Yes, it is," she managed. Dr Curtis reached across the table and handed her a tissue. She took it gratefully, but instead of dabbing her eyes held it in her hands, twisting and tearing it to shreds in her lap.

"And then, this morning, Dr Borlace tells me you told another young man, who'd just survived a very traumatic accident, that he should have been dead. I'm concerned, Kate, that you may not just be feeling the pressure but buckling under it. Have you been sleeping properly lately?"

She looked up at him. "No, I haven't. I've been having... nightmares."

He nodded, as if this was what he'd expected. "I think you need a break, don't you?"

"But I don't want to give this up!" she protested, the tissue tearing in two in her hands. "I've wanted to be a doctor my whole life. It won't happen again, I promise. All I need is one good night's sleep and I'll be fine!"

He studied her, considering for a moment. "Well, that may be true. Insomnia can certainly do very strange things to a person's mind. If this were any other job, if you were a student of any other subject, I'd agree. But people's lives, and the hospital's reputation, are in your hands here. You do see that, don't you?"



She did, but she wasn't willing to give everything up because of those damn visions. "I understand, Dr Curtis, but all I'm asking is one more chance. Let me take a few days off and then when I come back you can put me on probation. If I mess up again, I'm out. But I've never done anything like this before, I've been at the top of my class all the way through. Isn't everyone allowed to make one mistake?"

He looked at her for a very long time, his mouth set in a thin line, tapping his pen against his cheek. His face was unreadable and she knew that for all her impassioned plea what he was probably weighing up was the cost of getting rid of her against the cost of keeping her on. Finally, he said, "Very well. I'm putting you on suspension for a week. When you return I expect your behavior to be absolutely impeccable. And you'll be having counseling, too. I'll arrange it for you. Then, in a month's time, we'll reconsider the situation. Okay?"

She nodded mutely. In the circumstances, it was the best result she could possibly have hoped for.

Dr Curtis stood up and led her to the door. He opened it for her, but stood blocking her path for a moment. "Get some sleep," he said. "Things will all seem a lot better when you're rested."

But Kate wasn't sure that they would. And if the visions did continue, how could she possibly guarantee that she wouldn't say anything unsuitable to a patient again? Not to mention that Dr Curtis clearly didn't know about the Sux racing. If he ever found out about that, she knew she'd be finished for sure.

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Nurse Lien was having a bad day. She tried to keep cheerful, she honestly did, because it wasn't the patients' fault that her father was laying in another wing of the hospital, his body still stubbornly healthy while his mind remained as blank as when the stroke had first struck him. But she just couldn't help it. Every time she saw one of them, suffering and ill, it made her think of him and then it made her angry that these people might get better and her father never

would. Or, if they were terminal cases like Andrew Williams, it just reminded her that her father would never get better either.

She ought to go back to Andrew now, check that he was all right in his bath, and she was just about to when Olivia shouted out across the room that she needed help. Lien saw that her patient—a big lump of a man—was fitting, bloody foam frothing out of his mouth as his back arched away from the bed in pain and his arms and legs flailed.

For a moment, Lien wondered whether she should let someone else help to restrain him and go and take care of Andrew. But he'd been perfectly fine when she left him and the baths were designed so you couldn't drown in them even if you fell asleep. Besides, she didn't like the look in his eyes when she bathed him, knew that he was getting a pleasure from it that had little to do with being clean. She put it from her mind and hurried over to help Olivia.

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Rinoka had given up trying to figure out what was wrong with her face. She just pressed the button near her hand that administered small, carefully measured doses of morphine into her blood stream and let the worries drift away with the pain.

So her face was burnt, she thought. Big deal. They had amazing plastic surgery these days, didn't they? They could rebuild her, maybe even make her better than before, get rid of that mole she'd always hated on the side of her cheek, or fix the stupid uptilt to her nose. She smiled, but that hurt her face and the pain cut through the veil of happiness so that once again she was filled with dread about what she looked like now, what it was the nurse was so afraid to tell her.

Would her friends still like her if she was ugly, she wondered? Would they want to go clubbing with her when everyone else would be staring at her? Would she want to go, if all she'd get would be looks of sympathy and horror? And what about Takai? Though there'd never been anything said between them, she'd always sensed an attraction there and somewhere in the back of her mind, had assumed that one day they would end up together. That didn't seem

too likely now. Not that Takai only liked her for her looks, or at least she didn't think he did, but no boy would want to be seen with a girlfriend so deformed that everyone wondered what was wrong with him that he couldn't find anyone better.

She pressed the morphine drip button again, and then again, but though she felt the welcome warmth of the drug coursing through her veins this time it didn't bring relief from her worries with it. Rinoka had never had to cope with anything bad in her life. Her parents were rich, so she had pretty much everything she'd ever wanted. They lived in a nice area of Tokyo, she had a fine group of friends and she'd even done well at school, despite taking every available opportunity to have fun. Maybe, she thought, she'd been due a bit of bad luck in her life to balance things out. But this seemed disproportionate, as if someone had put a stone on one side of the scales and then someone else had thumped down a whole mountain on the other.

Rinoka felt wetness on her cheeks and she was surprised because crying wasn't normally something she did. And then, after a moment, she realized that she wasn't crying. The water was dripping down onto her from somewhere above. At the same moment, she felt an icy breeze blow through the room, evaporating the water from her face to leave little spots of coldness behind. She might have thought it was strange, because the room had no windows and the door was closed, but she was too busy wondering where the water had come from.

She squinted up at the ceiling. It was pure white and it certainly didn't look like there was any hose or sprinkler attached to it that might have gone wrong. After a second, though, she noticed that there was a darker patch, cream in the whiteness and it was spreading. A moment later, she saw another droplet of water form and then fall, splashing onto her bandaged chest this time. After that another, and then quicker and quicker as the individual droplets began to run together until there was a continuous stream of water pouring down from the ceiling.

For some reason, this felt like the last straw to Rinoka. After all the near-death and the fire and the realization that she'd be scarred for life, it was this final little thing that broke her and she began to cry in

earnest. Wasn't it enough that she had to be injured and in pain? Did she have to be soaking wet too?

As she began to feel the water leeching through the sheets onto her skin, it occurred to her for the first time that she didn't have to just lie there and take it. She was in a place full of people whose job it was to help her. Through a drug-hazed memory, she vaguely recalled the nurse telling her something about a call button and that if she pressed it, help would be there immediately.

She groped outwards with her bandaged right hand towards the bedside table where she seemed to remember the call button lay. The first thing her fingers encountered was a metallic tray-shaped object—the tray of suture instruments that the nurse had left behind. She pushed it out of the way, leaving it balancing even more precariously on the very edge of the table. As she did, she could feel the chill breeze in the room grow stronger, strong enough to push the rubber tubing of her saline drip towards her groping fingers. But with her eyes blinded by tears, she couldn't see that the tubing now lay in the way of the call button. Her fingers groped an inch further—and suddenly her hand found itself entangled in a loop of tubing.

Panicking, she pulled her arm away. All it did was tighten the noose around her wrist. The previously slack tubing stretched taught and the stand holding the bags of saline and the tube of morphine swayed towards the bed. It came closer, closer—almost toppling over. Rinoka reached out towards it, her hand still caught in the tubing, trying to loosen the pressure so that it wouldn't fall all the way and onto the bed.

It worked. The stand reached the end of its swing, then began to fall back again. But this time it had an even greater momentum. And Rinoka was leaning towards it, already half out of the bed and off balance. When it passed the central point of its swing, she felt the noose tighten round her wrist again, but this time it was pulling her away from the bed. As soon as she realized what was happening she tried to pull away, to rear back, but the water-soaked sheets had become a dead weight on her legs and she was weak from the accident and the large quantities of morphine flooding her system.

The stand passed the center point and kept on falling. The heavy bags of saline fluid attached to it swung outward, adding to its momentum. Rinoka felt herself dragged inexorably out of her bed. Then the stand reached the end of its arc—and for a moment it looked like it would right itself and swing back and Rinoka would be okay.

But the water was now pouring down from the ceiling at an alarming rate, and had begun to drip off the bed and form a pool on the floor. As Rinoka looked down, she saw that pool of water reach out a tendril—almost like a finger—towards the base of the stand. For a second it remained separate from it, held back by the surface tension of the water. Then, suddenly, the tension broke and the water rushed beneath the stand.

Losing traction on this suddenly slick surface, the base of the stand skidded towards the bed. Like a counterbalance, the top was flung further away from it. Rinoka was dragged with whiplash strength out of the bed to land squarely in the pool of water on the floor.

The rubber tubing finally untangled itself from her wrist with a sharp snap, wrenching the needle from the soft skin of her arm. A fine spray of blood shot up into her face. The tubing flew back towards the stand. On its way it caught the tray of surgical implements perched on the edge of Rinoka's bedside table.

The tray flipped up into the air. All the implements flew up above it. Rinoka could see them sparkling above her, knife blades shining blindingly silver in the neon light. Then, at the apogee of their ascent, they reversed and began to fall downward—slowly at first, then faster and faster as they approached Rinoka's unprotected body. They were all falling blade-down. And they were only two feet above her head.

Desperate, Rinoka tried to get up, to get away, but her legs and torso were still hopelessly entangled in the heavy, waterlogged bedding. Now the blades were one foot above her head.

Using a last reserve of energy she didn't know she had, Rinoka heaved her body sideways, twisted her head as hard as she could and rolled. For one moment she hung there and she knew that she was about to roll straight back, into the path of the surgical knives. They were only three inches above her now.

She forced the air out of her body and used all of her willpower for one final, frantic push.

And she rolled out of the way just as the knives thunked into the ground beside her precisely where her eyes would have been. At the final point of the roll, her leg kicked out against something heavy with all the force of her desperation.

It was the heart monitor. When Rinoka's foot made contact, it toppled over backwards, towards the largest pool of water on the floor. Sparks shot out of the machine as it scraped down the wall, and she smelt the ionic smell of something electronic burning.

She realized what was going to happen a moment before it did. The heart monitor was live, fully charged—and when it struck the water the electric current in it would be conducted straight through. And through anything else that was lying in it.

Like her.

She looked frantically around, but the water pouring through the ceiling seemed like a deluge now and it didn't look like any of the floor was free of it. Then she saw it, one small dry patch, like an island right in the center of this inland sea. It was two feet away.

Rinoka didn't know how she made it, but she spun herself over, rolling and rolling until she somehow instinctively knew it was time to stop. And there she was, wrapped tight in her sheets like a mummy, lying safely in the one water-free place in the room. It was a long, oval lozenge of dryness, the same shape as a sarcophagus. The perfect size for a human body, she thought. It was almost as if someone had deliberately designed it for her to lie on. Rinoka had never been religious, so there was no god she could thank for this amazing haven of safety. And besides, if there was a god she reckoned he'd been treating her pretty shitty over the last day.

But she still sent out a silent murmur of thanks to providence, or nature, or whatever as the heart monitor hit the ground and a giant blue spark arced through all the water on the floor, came within inches of her arms, but didn't quite touch her.

After that, everything suddenly seemed very quiet. She could hear voices outside, probably alerted by the noise of her tumble from the bed, but the room itself felt incredibly peaceful. She smiled, amazed

and rather proud of herself. She'd never really been tested before, had to deal with anything dangerous and difficult. Today she had and she felt that she'd acquitted herself well. Maybe, she thought, her mind free of the numbing drugs now that the drip had been ripped from her arm, she could cope with this injury. She could rebuild her life, maybe not the same life, but a good one nonetheless.

As she thought this, she gradually became aware that the room wasn't as quiet as it had been. There was a strange noise, a sort of creaking, cracking noise, coming from somewhere above her, and she felt a fine powder settling on her face. When she accidentally inhaled it, it made her sneeze and she recognized the chalky smell of plaster dust.

There was something wrong with the ceiling, she realized. She looked up.

Just in time to see the broad crack open up. Through it a great white thing that some distant part of her recognized as a bath came plunging down towards her. Her last thought was that it was exactly the same size and shape as the dry patch on the floor.

Then the metallic base of the thing hit her. It stuck her nose first. Within a microsecond, the uptilt she'd always hated so much had been corrected. Another microsecond later, it had brutally pushed the sharp white bones of her nose upwards and into the gray matter in her cranial cavity. Eighteen years of memories were erased in an instant.

After that, it smashed into her teeth, knocking shards of enamel out to the floor and downwards into the soft flesh of her throat. One of them shredded through her tonsils, detaching them with a precision that any surgeon would have been proud of.

Then, finally, it struck the rest of her body. Her internal organs, all of them, were instantly crushed. Her gall bladder split open inside her, spilling a vicious green bile into her bloodstream that would have killed her anyway if she hadn't already been dead. Her lungs, designed to be as porous as sponges to filter the vital oxygen she needed out of the air, were compressed into two soggy gray pancakes. And her intestine was squeezed like a tube of toothpaste, shooting one high-velocity stream of feces out of what remained of

her rectum and another through the wrecked remnants of her mouth.

By the time it was finished, what was left on the floor of the room wasn't even recognizable as human.

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Kate had meant to go home after her talk with Dr Curtis, but as soon as she stepped out of his office, exhaustion hit her like a brick wall, the adrenaline surge she'd experienced during their talk fading fast and leaving a leaden tiredness behind. She barely managed to make it to one of the visitor's chairs in the ER before she collapsed.

But only seconds after she'd fallen asleep, she felt an insistent tapping on her arm. She glanced up to see an African-American man looming over her, grinning. His face seemed vaguely familiar, though she couldn't remember exactly where she'd seen it before.

"Have you got it?" he asked her.

She nodded and pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket, then wondered how she'd known what he was talking about. Her eyes scanned the paper, but all that it contained was a list of names. These looked familiar, too, though she was quite sure she'd never seen them before: Rinoka Aratsu, Peter Hoffman, Jack Cohen, Mary-Beth Bradbury, Bodil Raden, James Barker, Danny King and Louise King.

Before she could stop him, the man took the piece of paper from her and crossed out the top name, Rinoka Aratsu, with a thick black marker pen.

"One down," he said.

And then Kate snapped awake, to find the hospital in uproar around her as everyone raced to the ward where a freak accident had just seen a young woman crushed to death beneath a bath.



# SIX

Kate had volunteered to tell the other students about Rinoka's death. She'd told the hospital administrator that she'd met some of the people involved and knew their address and wouldn't it be better for them to get the news in person rather than over the phone? But the administrator, a sour middle-aged woman who seemed to bitterly resent anyone younger than her, had told Kate that she absolutely wasn't to do it. Kate suspected she must have heard about the disciplinary hearing with Dr Curtis. Or, she thought more uncharitably, the hospital were more worried about getting sued and wanted to send someone who'd cover their backs legally.

So she'd ignored the administrator and headed straight to the address the boy, Danny, had given her.

Now that she was standing outside the dusty little hotel in Murray Hill though, she wondered what the hell she'd been thinking. Telling people about a bereavement was never pleasant at the best of times. When you had to tell them that their friend had been crushed to death beneath an overflowing bath... Well, what exactly did you say? She certainly wasn't going to tell them about the dream she'd had. Anyway, that was probably just her subconscious, sleeping mind dealing with the furor over Rinoka's death by incorporating it into her dream. But she'd somehow felt that she owed it to them and especially to Danny after the awful words she'd blurted out to him. And a part of her wanted to ask him about his vision, the one that had predicted the crash. If he was going through what she was going through she had to know—if only to convince herself that she wasn't going insane, or at least wasn't the only one.

A little bit of her she didn't want to acknowledge also remembered the tight fit of Danny's T-shirt over the muscles of his abdomen and the mischievous sparkle in his unusual golden eyes. But that was ridiculous. He couldn't have been older than eighteen. And anyway, she would never be disloyal to Brad. Though she'd barely thought of him since this morning and she realized with guilt—she hadn't even let him know about her meeting with Dr Curtis. Her heart sunk at the

thought of telling him. She could just imagine his expression, so disappointed in her.

She realized that she'd been standing outside daydreaming when someone suddenly said, "Are you lost?" in a thick German accent and she saw that a young, soft-faced man had poked his head out of the door of the hotel.

She shook her head to clear it, then smiled. As she did, she remembered that she'd seen this young man before. He'd been part of the group that Danny had been with in the reception area of the ER. "I'm looking for Danny King," she said. "You're here with him, aren't you?"

"Yes." He gazed at her a moment. His eyes were dark with shadows and it occurred to her what a terrible time these kids had been having. "You're from the hospital," he said after a moment, "I recognize you."

She nodded.

His eyes darkened still further. "It's Rinoka, isn't it? What's happened?"

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Louise sat with the others in a ring surrounding the medical student who'd introduced herself as Kate Shelley. They'd pulled chairs together in the lobby of the hotel and listened in horrified silence as she told them exactly how Rinoka had died. The worst thing was, it was all so ridiculous she felt a terrible, inappropriate urge to laugh. Her eye caught Bodil's as she glanced round the circle and she could see that she was feeling the same thing too.

Mary-Beth looked distraught, though. "That's terrible, just terrible," she kept saying, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I'm very sorry." Kate sounded as guilty as if she'd killed Rinoka herself.

Mary-Beth looked up at her and managed a smile. "We're grateful for you coming to tell us in person. I'll have to let her family know, of course."

"If you pass the details on to the hospital I'm sure they'll do that for you."

The older woman shook her head. "How can I let them? She was my responsibility. I was supposed to be like a parent to her. If anyone should break the news it's me."

Louise thought that Mary-Beth was looking older than her years, her impossibly wrinkled face sagging inwards as if the events of the last day had sucked all the life and energy out of her.

"It's not your fault, though," Danny said. "The crash and the... the bath thing, they were just accidents. There was nothing you could have done about it. You've taken the best care of us you possibly could. Right?"

He looked round at the others, and they all nodded. He smiled encouragingly at Mary-Beth, but Louise thought he looked exhausted, almost as weary as Mary-Beth herself. And alone of all of them, he hadn't seemed terribly surprised when he'd heard the news about Rinoka. It was almost as if he'd been expecting it.

Mary-Beth took his hand and squeezed it between two of her own. "Bless you for saying that." But Louise could hear in her voice that while her rational mind might know he was right, in her heart she still blamed herself.

She examined her own feelings about Rinoka. Beyond the shock she found it hard to claim that she was deeply upset. She simply hadn't known her all that well and if she was honest with herself she'd found her faintly irritating. But then it struck her that now she never would get the chance to get to know her better. Rinoka was gone from the world completely and somewhere in Japan there was a mother and a father and friends and maybe a boyfriend who would never see her again. It seemed—just terribly unfair.

Her reverie was interrupted by Kate standing up. "I'd better... I'd better be heading off, I guess," she said awkwardly. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

Danny stood up too. "I'll see you out," he said, even though the exit was only a short walk down the hall. Louise looked at him intently, trying to work out what his game was. Her brother could be a fast mover when he wanted to be but this really didn't seem the time.

Kate didn't seem pleased, anyway. In fact, she looked actively alarmed, as if the last thing she wanted to do was spend any time at all with Danny.

"There's no need," she said, "I've got to use the bathroom first, anyway."

Danny wasn't put off, though. "It's upstairs, let me show you the way." He took hold of Kate's arm as they exited the room together—a gesture that looked gentlemanly but probably had more to do with stopping her getting away.

Louise stared after him, frowning. She hated that she didn't know what was going on in her brother's mind. They'd always had that telepathic twin thing going, always known what the other one was thinking, sensing what they needed, even finishing each other's sentences sometimes. But this last day, she'd started to feel like she didn't know her brother at all.

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Danny could see Kate's face become pale as she saw him still standing at the bottom of the hotel stairs when she came back down. She'd obviously hoped that he wouldn't bother to wait for her. He knew she didn't want to talk to him. But ever since he'd heard the news about Rinoka and instead of thinking "What the hell...?" had thought "So it happened," he'd known that Kate had some of the answers he needed. He took her arm again, daring her to break away from him.

They walked in silence down the hallway, her arm straining against his hand, and just before they reached the door he turned her round to face him.

"So, you were right," he said. "We were supposed to die."

She looked stricken, as if he was suggesting that she'd somehow caused Rinoka's death. "That wasn't what I meant," she said. "I swear, I never expected this to happen."

"Then why did it happen?" he demanded. She gave a small cry of pain and he realized that his fingers had tightened unconsciously on her arm. He loosened them immediately but he didn't let go. He

hated bullying her this way, it was totally out of character for him, but he had to know.

She shrugged. Her freckles stood out sharply in her white face. "It was just a... I don't know, a string of coincidences or accidents that added up to something horrible."

"Rinoka nearly died after the crash, you know," Danny told her. "That's why she was in the hospital. After the collision, a bit of the train came flying out towards her. If I hadn't dived in she would have been cut in two."

"Well, that was very brave of you," she said, but he shook his head impatiently.

"That's not why I'm telling you. I'm just saying... it was almost like someone, something, was out to get her. I stopped it by getting us away from the crash, so then it tried again straight afterwards. And then when that failed too it tried again in the hospital and that time it succeeded."

She looked at him incredulously. "You're saying that some... evil force dropped a bath on top of Rinoka because it wanted her to die."

He dropped her arm and stepped back. When she put it like that, it sounded ridiculous. "No..."

"Danny, you've been through a horrible thing," she said. "You're upset and you're not being rational."

Suddenly, all he could think was that she was completely right. He wasn't being rational at all. He'd always prided himself on his calmness, his ability to cope with anything and it wasn't like he'd never been tested. That time he and Louise had gone out base jumping and he'd twisted his ankle when they'd landed and they'd been miles from help, he hadn't panicked. He'd got Louise to construct a temporary splint and then he'd limped slowly back to safety. But that was a physical danger, something immediate that he could see and deal with. All this shit with the visions—it was something outside his normal realm of experience. No wonder it had freaked him out. And really, so what if the vision had been real? He'd saved their lives and now he needed to move on.

But... But... Something told him it wasn't quite as simple as that. "So, you really think it's over?" he asked Kate. "You think now

Rinoka's gone that's it?"

"Of course," she said. But, for just a second before she said it, she hesitated. Which was all the answer he needed.

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Kate was kicking herself by the time she got home. Why hadn't she told him about her dream, about the list she'd seen? Because it would have frightened him, she told herself and he was already very scared. But what if the list meant what—in a secret part of her—she thought it meant, that Rinoka was just the first? In that case Danny wasn't nearly frightened enough.

For a moment, she hesitated in the center of Broadway, debating whether to go back to the hotel and warn Danny and the others of the danger they might be in. She spun on her heel and turned to go back the way she'd come. But then she thought about the trouble that kind of thing had already got her into, the fact that her whole medical career might be over because of it and she hesitated again.

She was brought out of her reverie by a steep increase in the usual background New York noise of car horns and she realized that she was still standing in the middle of the road and the lights had changed to green. Making her mind up, she sprinted for the far side of the road and then headed home to face Brad and the music.

He was every bit as unsympathetic as she'd expected.

"I can't believe you were so stupid, Kate," he said, as if she hadn't beaten herself up about it already. But she didn't have the energy to argue with him so she just told him that she was going to follow Dr Curtis's advice and get some sleep, then headed straight to bed.

In the morning, she found that Brad had pegged out on the sofa. She slipped into the small kitchen—a miracle of shiny silver units that Brad loved but which always looked to her far too forbidding to actually cook on—and made herself some eggs sunny-side up and a couple of slices of toast.

She was just about to head out of the door to school when she remembered that she was on suspension for the week, or possibly indefinitely. It was an odd feeling. She'd been working so hard for so

long, with only one goal in mind, that she didn't quite know what to do with herself now it had been taken away.

As she was still pondering her options, Brad cracked an eye open on the sofa, gummy with sleep. A moment later he leapt to his feet.

"What time is it?"

She checked her watch. "A quarter to eight."

"Shit! I'm going to be late. Why didn't you wake me up?" He glared at her accusingly.

"Sorry, I didn't know what time you were due to start today."

As the fog of sleep lifted from him, she could see him remembering what she'd told him last night. His expression closed in on itself. "So, what are you going to do today?" As he spoke he was hurriedly shucking the dress shirt he'd fallen asleep in last night. Rumpled and bad-tempered, he looked forty years old, very little like the handsome freshman she'd first fallen in love with. She found herself feeling a startling emptiness when she looked at him, as if all her feelings for him had simply drained away over the last few days. "Kate?" he said impatiently and she remembered that he'd asked her a question.

She looked outside the window, at the small view of a tree, its leaves dappled yellow-green by the midsummer sun. "Oh, I don't know, maybe I'll just go and sit in Central Park or something." As she said it, she realized how attractive this idea was. A day without worries, without responsibilities. She was only twenty-three, but for the last while, years really, she'd been acting like she was a decade older. "Yeah, actually, that'd be really cool."

Brad frowned at her. "Don't you think you should concentrate on preparing a case to put to the disciplinary board in case they decide to make this more permanent? Or at the very least you could study, there's a midterm coming up and I know you haven't put the work into anatomy that you should have." He sounded like a father telling off his wayward daughter. She wondered how much of her premature aging was down to him, to his expectations of her. She'd been living a life he approved of, but for the first time she wondered if it was the one she really wanted.

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She didn't go to Central Park; she went to the zoo instead. It was one of those places, touristy places, that everyone who visited New York went to and people who lived there seldom did. The same way, despite four years in the city, that she'd never been to the top of the Empire State Building, never seen the Mets or the Yankees play at home, or the Nicks come to that and hadn't once stepped inside the Guggenheim despite walking past it every day on her way to the hospital.

Well, that's what she'd use this week for, get to know New York the way tourists did and fall in love with the city all over again. Even if she couldn't carry on in medicine, she was living in the greatest place in the world, a land and a town of opportunities that most people could only dream of.

It was a beautiful day for it, too. The sky, which yesterday evening had been lowering and hazy, like a yellow veil over the city, had dawned a clear and vibrant blue today. And now that she didn't have to work in it, the heat felt like a blessing rather than an oppressive weight. Maybe she would sunbathe in Central Park later. But first she wanted to check out the zoo. It felt like such a wonderfully childish thing to do.

As she traveled on the subway all the way out across the East River, she found herself drifting into a trancelike state. But instead of unpleasant visions, all she experienced was a mellow feeling of contentment, as if she was exactly where she was supposed to be, doing exactly what she was supposed to be doing. She felt, more than anything, free.

And maybe, she thought, that had been the problem. She didn't want to get all Freudian about it—her mum had bored her with enough of that crap when she'd been going through her middle-aged self-discovery phase a few years ago—but maybe all the death she'd been thinking about had just been a metaphor for feeling trapped, as if something important inside her had died.

Maybe the Sux racing and everything that followed it had been the best thing that could have happened to her. Because it had woken



her up to the fact that her life had seemed full but had contained at its heart a gaping emptiness. She knew that emptiness had a lot to do with Brad, but she didn't want to think about that now. She just wanted to be in the moment for once. To enjoy herself. She could leave everything bad behind her and make a fresh start. Today—to quote the cliché—would be the first day of the rest of her life.

She was still feeling upbeat when she strolled through the great gates of the zoo and into the rolling acres that contained such an improbable collection of animals in the center of the concrete jungle of New York. She decided to head straight for the penguins, which she'd always thought looked like they'd been designed by God as a practical joke.

It was feeding time when she got there and she found herself laughing with delight as she watched the birds, so waddling and ungainly on dry land, become sleek torpedoes underwater as they dived for the fish. Everything's okay in its right element, she thought, you just have to work out what that element is.

She was so busy looking at the penguins that she didn't notice the person standing behind her until he spoke. "You know what, I just don't believe in coincidences any more."

She spun round to see Danny standing beside his punky twin sister, staring at her challengingly.

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James picked irritably at the stitches in his cheek. He still couldn't quite believe that they were on a trip to the zoo just a day after Rinoka had died. A day after they'd all nearly died. But Mary-Beth had told them that she'd been unable to secure early flights home for any of them—a sudden wildcat airworkers' strike had closed down most of the airport—and if they were going to stay in New York there was no point just sitting in the hotel brooding. They might as well get on with the itinerary. Mary-Beth had looked like this was the last thing she actually wanted to do and maybe that was why James had led the others in agreeing. She was clearly making a huge effort to keep their spirits up and it seemed rude not to respond in some way.

And the funny thing was, now he was actually here, he really was enjoying himself. In fact, he felt elated. He could probably come up with all kinds of scientific explanations about endorphin rushes and the after-effects of massive surges of adrenaline, but he decided to give it a rest and just enjoy the moment.

The group had split up into twos or threes to tour the zoo, and he'd found himself somehow paired with Bodil. She seemed to have latched on to him.

"Look at that," she said now, pointing at a strange creature that looked like a cross between a guinea pig and a kangaroo, and was apparently called a mara. "It's enough to make you stop believing in evolution, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning into her blue eyes. They sparked a challenge back at him.

"Well, it's so unlikely, isn't it? And look at those." She pointed over at a group of giraffes. "They look ridiculous! Why would anyone design a creature to look like that?"

"Well," James said, "without wanting to indulge in any 'just so' stories as Stephen Gould would have called them, it's generally thought—"

He cut off abruptly as Bodil clamped her hand over his mouth. "No, no," she said. "I don't want an explanation. It's much more fun when it's a mystery."

This was exactly the sort of thing James's mother would have said after one of her lengthy and frequent mushroom trips and James would have liked to tell Bodil exactly what a stupid, anti-rational statement it was, but his heart was beating too fast. When she took her hand away from his mouth, he could still feel the slightly moist imprint of it against his cheek, as if she'd left her mark on him.

So he didn't say anything and just followed her mutely into the insect house. He noticed that one tank, containing a bulbously hairy tarantula, was cracked clean across its front. The creature was sitting right against the crack, staring venomously out. Or perhaps staring at the back wall, it was hard to tell when it had eight eyes.

It looked dangerous, nonetheless and it suddenly occurred to him that everywhere inside the zoo human beings were surrounded by

death. They'd brought every predator on the planet to this one place and all that kept them away from their prey was a thin sheet of glass or some wire meshing. The zoo was full of hungry eyes, looking and waiting. It was an uncomfortable thought, and he shivered involuntarily.

"Isn't it more exciting," Bodil said from right behind his shoulder. He jumped and let out a small yelp, then turned to scowl at her.

She smiled blithely and carried on:—"to think that this is a woman who was transformed into a spider for the sin of comparing her sewing to a god's? Doesn't that make the world a more interesting place than if it's just some boring old spider?"

James shook his head. "The myth of Arachne, you mean. It's a nice story, but I think it's even more amazing to think about what spiders are really like. Did you know that millimeter for millimeter the spider's web is stronger than steel? Or, that a single female spider can give birth to five hundred young in one sitting? Or, that people used to use spider webs for dressing wounds, because there's a natural anticoagulant in the silk? The natural world's incredible enough without making up stories about it."

Bodil looked at him for a long time with narrowed eyes. Then she smiled. "So, do you want to fuck?"

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Peter had seen the others head off into various sections of the zoo in twos and threes, but before he could join any of them, Mary-Beth had linked her arm through his and led him off in the direction of the great cats.

"Now, I want you to tell me what makes you so sad," she said to him when they stood by the tiger's cage, admiring the great velvety creature as it paced restlessly backwards and forwards, its eyes gleaming like jewels.

Peter looked at her, surprised. "Well, I'm sad about Rinoka," he said, but Mary-Beth shook her head.

"I'm sure you are," she said. "You're a sensitive boy. But you were sad before that and I think maybe Rinoka's death just stirred up an

older pain. I can see it sitting on your shoulders, like a burden that's been weighing you down for a long time. Is it your mother?"

She loosened her arm from his, as if aware that he would need some space. Peter swallowed convulsively several times, but didn't meet her eye, afraid of what the sympathy he'd find there would do to his fragile composure.

"She died," he said eventually. "Giving birth to me. My father, my family, we're Catholics. He wasn't allowed to choose between her life and mine, so God chose for him and for some reason he chose me." He was amazed and horrified at how bitter his voice sounded. His father would have beaten him if he'd ever heard him talking about God in that way.

"Oh, I see," Mary-Beth said. Her voice was filled with a sudden, deep grief and he looked up in surprise to see that a tear was hovering at the corner of her eye, on the cusp of falling.

"Are you... are you okay?" he asked, awkwardly reaching over to pat her on the shoulder.

"Don't you be worrying about me," she said fiercely, brushing the tear impatiently from her eye to shatter on the ground. "I'm supposed to give comfort to you. I'd like to hear more about your mother, Peter."

"I'm not sure I want to talk about it," he said, stiffly. "I don't mean to offend you, but it's a very private thing."

"Oh, I understand that, honey, I really do." MaryBeth leaned against the fence and he realized that she was exhausted. Coping with what they'd been through was hard enough at eighteen; it was amazing someone her age was able to keep going at all. Solicitously, he took her arm and led her over to a bench. He was rewarded with a brilliant smile, which for an instant showed him the beautiful, carefree girl that Mary-Beth had once been.

"I tell you what," she said. "Why don't I tell you what ails me and when you've heard it maybe you'll want to share a little of your own troubles. They always say a problem shared is a problem halved though personally I think that's baloney. Grief should be hoarded, not spread around. But sometimes talking really does help. Is that all right with you?"

Peter nodded, beginning to see Mary-Beth as just another human being, rather than as the old lady who was their guardian. It struck him that this was something he'd never been able to do with his own father, to move beyond the surface sternness to the man beneath and he resolved to try harder when he returned to Germany.

Mary-Beth smiled gently at him. "Come on, let's take a walk while we talk. I always find my brain works better when my legs are moving." She hooked her arm through his again, then led him in the direction of the monkey enclosures.

"You see," she began, there's a reason why I've chosen to work with youngsters like yourself all my life. When I was twenty, living back in South Carolina, there was nothing in the world I wanted so much as a child of my own." Her expression had grown distant, as if she was looking at a far horizon only she could see.

"And when I was twenty-two, I got my wish. I met Tom, a worker at the steel mill, we married, and two months later I was carrying the baby I'd always longed for. It was more difficult than I'd imagined, most things usually are, carrying that young life around inside me. I felt like my body wasn't my own anymore and I had aches and pains like you wouldn't believe. I'd always been foolishly proud of my figure too and it was hard to see it changing into the shape of a sack. But it didn't matter, because in only a few months I'd have a baby of my own."

She paused for so long Peter wondered if she'd fallen asleep. But her eyes were full of a waking darkness. "I was eight months gone when it happened. They said later he'd just been fired from his job. He wasn't a drinker, normally, but that night he went to the bar and threw more beers down his throat than he knew how to handle and then he got in his pick-up and he drove it home.

"They're not sure if he fell asleep at the wheel. Maybe he was so drunk he couldn't see the road properly." There was another long pause before she continued, very quietly, "I was on the sidewalk, I'd slipped out to see my brother Ted who was living down the road and had come down with stomach flu two days previously.

"He didn't even see me, he said at the trial. His pick-up was still driving forty miles an hour when it hit. Threw me clean over to the

other side of the road."

Peter felt his heart lurch. It was almost as if MaryBeth knew his own life history. He looked into her eyes, to see if this was a story she was making up for his benefit, but he saw nothing in them except sincerity and a long-buried pain. "I'm sorry," he said.

She nodded, accepting his sympathy graciously. "He was filled with remorse as soon as he'd seen what he'd done," she continued. "Managed to drive me to the hospital himself, though we only have the Lord to thank he didn't hit anyone else along the way. I'd lost so much blood by then I lost consciousness. The nurse recognized me though and she called Tom out and he came straight to me. So it was him who had to make the decision: save me or save his child." She hesitated a moment, and Peter could see that this was deeply painful for her. "He chose me."

"That must have been hard," Peter said, his voice choked. "He must have loved you very much."

Mary-Beth nodded. "I know he did. But I never forgave him for it. It was the end of our marriage."

Peter was stunned. "But why? He saved your life!"

Mary-Beth's mouth trembled. "And he took my baby's. Until you're a parent yourself you'll never understand. I'd have done anything for that child—for my daughter." A single tear tracked down the side of her nose. "I would gladly have given my life for her. But he took that choice away from me."

"Really?" Peter said. "You really wish you'd died and the baby had lived?"

"Of course. Any mother would say the same. Your mother would say the same, Peter, if she was alive to say it."

For the first time in his life, Peter felt a great weight lifting off his shoulders. In all his wonderings about the injustice of him living when his mother had died, it had never really occurred to him that this would have been the outcome she'd have chosen. He'd assumed his father had acted purely out of religious faith on the dictates of cold doctrine. But maybe there'd been more to it. Maybe he'd known how much Peter's mother had treasured the life growing within her and made the decision he knew she would have wanted.

Peter smiled at Mary-Beth. "Thank you for telling me... I appreciate it."

She smiled back, her years dropping off her again. He sensed that telling the story had lifted a burden for her, too. "You need to live your own life Peter, enjoy it, because I can promise you that's what your mother would have wanted."

He smiled at her again, but the smile turned into a shiver. The sun had slipped temporarily behind the one small gray cloud in the sky and a sudden chill breeze brought goose bumps up on his arms.

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"This isn't a coincidence," Danny said to Kate. He saw the expression on Louise's face and turned to face her challengingly. "It isn't, Lou. There's something fucking freaky going on here."

"Like what?" Louise said. "The fact that two people who are in New York bump into each other in New York. Ooh, I'm scared." She whistled *The Twilight Zone* music.

He shook his head angrily. "It's not any two people. It's two people who've been having the same visions about death." He turned to Kate. "You have been having those visions, haven't you?" She still looked like she'd deny it. He took a step towards her. "Haven't you?"

"Yes," she said eventually, as if she found saying the word actually physically painful. "Yes I have."

Danny almost sagged with relief. Just to hear this, to have it confirmed, made him feel hugely better. When his vision had been an isolated thing, something he could neither explain nor repeat, it had been terrifyingly nebulous. But if it was part of a pattern, if it was something he could predict and control, then that was fine. He could draw up a plan, like he always did when something went wrong, then he could implement it and then everything would be all right again.

"Okay," he said to Kate. "Tell me all about it."

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James had assumed Bodil was joking. He very quickly discovered that she wasn't. When she saw his open-mouthed expression she

laughed, then grabbed his arm and began pulling him through the zoo grounds at a half-run.

"Bodil!" he said. "Stop!" But she ignored him and he was forced to push his heels into the ground to drag her to a halt.

She looked puzzled and a bit hurt. "But I thought you wanted to. I've seen the way you look at me."

James hardly knew what to say to her. "I'm a virgin" sprung to mind, but he instantly dismissed it, along with "I haven't got any condoms" and "have you got any communicable diseases?"

He settled for, "But we're in the middle of a zoo!"

Bodil grinned at him. "Yeah, exciting, isn't it? I've done it in an aquarium before, but never in a zoo. Come on—in here should be perfect."

She dragged him towards a building marked "NOCTURNAL ANIMALS."

As soon as they entered, they were plunged into almost pitch-blackness. James felt a sudden clenching in his gut, a reawakening of childhood fears of the dark, but he pushed them aside. He had more important things to be worrying about.

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Peter was still feeling buoyant after his talk with Mary-Beth, so when a group of youths pushed past, laughing and shouting and nearly shoved Mary-Beth into one of the bushes, he shouted out, "Mind where you're going!" at them in an uncharacteristic display of assertiveness.

The leader of the group instantly spun to face him. He was a hollow-cheeked Hispanic boy, and for a moment as the midday sun cast deep shadows under his eyes and nose, his face almost looked like a skull.

Peter took an involuntary step backwards.

It was a mistake. Taking this as a sign of weakness, the gang leader sauntered forward until his face was right in Peter's. The great white scar slicing raggedly through his cheek shone white in the sun. "You wanna say that again?" he whispered.



Peter felt a sudden coldness against his stomach. When he looked down, he saw that there was a shining steel blade pressed into the material of his shirt, its tip so sharp that it had slipped between the weave of the material to prick the skin beneath. "I'm... I'm sorry," he said. He looked around for help, but they'd wandered into a secluded corner, shielded by trees, to have their talk, and now they were out of sight of any possible rescue.

"You leave him alone, you hear?" Mary-Beth said fiercely, no sign of fear evident in her voice. But the gang leader just seemed to find this funny.

"Or you're gonna do what, mamma?" he said her.

"Hey, Rico, maybe she could gnaw you to death with her false teeth," another of the gang members said, a big burly guy with the most pockmarked skin Peter had ever seen. The others all laughed then exchanged words in Spanish which, from their tone, were a series of good-natured insults. But when the leader looked back at Peter there was nothing good-natured about his expression at all.

Peter realized with a kind of numb horror that he could see his own death in this stranger's eyes. For no reason at all, just wounded pride and boredom and an existence that had taught him to place no value on life, the kid in front of him was going to kill him. And afterwards he'd boast to his friends about it and laugh. Peter closed his eyes, accepting it.

But then he realized that they'd almost certainly kill Mary-Beth too, so as not to leave any witnesses and he knew he couldn't let that happen. Before he'd even realized what he was going to do, he punched his fist into the gang leader's stomach with all his strength.

He'd spent his youth on a farm, milking cows, digging the earth and he was far stronger than he looked. And the gang leader, Rico, who'd thought that Peter was beaten and cowed, was too surprised to defend himself. He doubled over in pain.

In the moment of startled surprise from the other gang members, Peter grabbed Mary-Beth's arm and ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

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"So you've been seeing visions of people's deaths," Louise said incredulously, "and then they've been coming true." Her pixie face was screwed up in an expression of profound disbelief and her wild pale eyes glared an accusation.

"Yes," Kate said. "Ever since my own... near-death experience. It's like once I stepped over the boundary I couldn't step all the way back again. I've brought a little bit of death back with me." She'd never articulated it like this before, but when she said it she realized it made a twisted kind of sense.

Louise didn't seem to think so, though. "Yeah, right," she scoffed. "Or maybe you just came back one ward short of a hospital."

Danny scowled at her.

"I don't know why you won't believe it," Kate said in irritation. "I mean, wouldn't you be dead if Danny hadn't had a vision of his own?"

"Yeah, but that was just a bad feeling, right Danny?" She looked at her brother pleadingly, begging him to support her.

But Danny shook his head. "I saw it on the ghost train, Lou, the whole crash. And then it happened exactly the way I saw it."

Louise stared at him a moment, looking betrayed. Then she seemed to pull herself together. "Fine, yeah, whatever. Somehow you saw the future and saved all our lives. And then somehow she—" she pointed at Kate, "—knew that Rinoka was going to die and didn't save her life. And now it's all done. It's finished. So what's the point of going over and over it?"

Danny looked long and hard at Kate, and she saw the yellow inferno of the sun reflected in his eyes. "Except it isn't finished at all, is it?" he said.

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Peter tried to find a park official, someone to help them, but there didn't seem to be any around and all the other people in the zoo studiously ignored them, terrified to put themselves in the middle of

a fight that wasn't their own and end up as collateral damage. The gang was gaining on him and Mary-Beth all the time.

They'd almost caught up before he spotted it, tucked away behind some trees: the insect house. There, maybe, they would be able to hide. He dragged Mary-Beth through the entrance during the brief second when they were out of sight of the gang. Inside, the dark rendered him nearly blind, but then he saw it; a space between two of the great glass tanks just big enough to squeeze them both in.

He shoved Mary-Beth in first then backed in after her. He could hardly see anything of the main bulk of the room from that position, just a narrow slit of view about one foot wide. If the gang followed, he wouldn't be able to see them coming. But it wasn't as if seeing them would help, anyway. He concentrated on slowing his breathing, trying to make himself as quiet, as invisible, as possible.

Then there was an almighty thud against the glass beside him. His hands closed convulsively on Mary-Beth's and she let out a small gasp of pain. But after a moment he saw that it was simply a woman with a baby stroller who'd misjudged the distance in the dark and pushed it into the tank they were hiding behind. Very slowly and carefully, he let out the breath he'd been holding.

Because he was tucked to one side, he didn't see that the stroller had struck the exact point where the already cracked glass was weakest. He didn't see the crack rush and spread up the surface of the tank like crystalline lightning, leaving a gap behind that was a good two inches thick. Inside, the bulbous body of the spider began to move towards this tantalizing gateway to freedom.

But Peter was still looking at the narrow gap in his world, senses alert for any sign of their pursuers. After a few minutes, when none appeared, he began to relax, his heart rate slowing from its frantic gallop.

Then, terrifyingly, the scar-faced gang leader appeared, framed in the gap, dark eyes darting to left and right as he searched for them. For a moment, he was looking right at Peter.

But his eyes couldn't penetrate the darkness of their hiding place. After another second he moved away, heading back out of the insect house.

Peter and Mary-Beth waited a long time before emerging. When they finally did, Mary-Beth surprised him by smiling and shaking her head. "Well," she said, "you Germans sure do know how to show a girl a good time."

Peter smiled back at her, suddenly giddy with relief. "Come on," he said, "I think I saw a sign for the restaurant out the other side. We should be able to get help there." Supporting Mary-Beth under her arm, he began to lead her out of the entrance to the vast dark room.

As he brushed past the glass tank on the way, a small, hairy passenger made the leap from the crack in its cage to the shirt on Peter's back. But Peter was too busy looking after Mary-Beth to notice.

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James couldn't quite believe he was doing this. They were surrounded by people, some as little as four feet away and yet he was letting Bodil pull down the fly of his pants, the zipper making a horribly loud noise to his ears. He looked around guiltily, but no one seemed to have noticed. Except, he suddenly saw, the possum against whose cage Bodil had pressed him and who was staring at him with the wide, shocked eyes of a child which had just caught its parents necking on the living room sofa.

He thought about telling Bodil to stop, but that would involved making some noise which would be bound to attract attention and by this point his pants were around his ankles and Bodil was on her knees in front of him.

Besides which, there was a big part of him which didn't want her to stop. He was finally doing something even his parents would find shocking.

And then Bodil's mouth closed around him and he didn't think about anything at all for several more minutes.

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"I saw a list. Of names," Kate said. "All of your names, I think. And Rinoka's was first."

"And then what happened?" Danny asked.

"And then a man came and crossed Rinoka's name off." Danny could hear that Kate's voice was shaking. "And then he said, 'One down—'"

"—the rest of us to go," Danny finished. His mind started working overtime, trying to put things together, slotting different parts into place until they made a coherent whole, the way he did when he solved the physics problems he'd always breezed through in class.

"But why?" Louise protested. "Wasn't the point of you getting the vision so you could stop us dying?"

Danny thought he was beginning to see it. "Yeah, but maybe my visions and Kate's visions don't come from the same place. Whatever sent me the vision was trying to save us, but there's another force out there, the one that Kate's somehow plugged into, that meant for us to die and wants to correct the fact that we didn't."

"No." Louise stepped back, shaking her head. "No, this is just ridiculous. What, you're saying God tried to save us and now Satan's trying to kill us off?"

Kate looked alarmed too. "Is that what you're saying, Danny? That I'm somehow getting messages from... from Satan?"

Danny shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe it's more natural than that, just death and life fighting it out. But think about it. In my vision, Rinoka was the first to die and then she was the first one that death came back for. And the way she died, that huge string of coincidences, you've got to admit it doesn't sound natural."

Louise was a fighter. She was stubborn, scrappy and as contrary as hell. But she wasn't stupid. He saw in her face the moment when she really bought into what he was saying. An icy fear seemed to settle into the back of her eyes and he felt suddenly guilty, as if he'd been responsible for robbing his twin sister of her innocence.

"So who's next?" she said, her voice husky. "Who died next in the vision?"

Danny knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it confirmed. He turned to Kate. "The same person who was next on your list, right?"

Louise turned to her. "And who was that?"

Kate swallowed. "It was Peter."

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The restaurant was warm and welcoming, and Peter felt like he'd reached a haven of safety. He couldn't see the gang members attacking them here, in front of all these people, and he was sure the cooking staff would have a phone he could use to call the police. He gently sat Mary-Beth at one of the wooden tables, then headed over to the counter.

"Excuse me," he said to the small gray-haired woman serving.

She looked at him in utter horror, her hand raised to her mouth as if to stifle a scream.

"What is it?" he said, frowning.

She didn't take her hand away from her mouth, didn't reply, and just held out her other hand towards him, trembling, pointing at something on his chest.

But Peter couldn't imagine anything on his chest that would have frightened her so much. He assumed that she must be pointing through him, to something behind him. Thinking that the gang must have followed him in here despite what he'd believed, he spun round to look.

The red and black spider that had been clinging to the front of his shirt, crawling inexorably towards the bare skin of his neck, wasn't prepared for the sudden motion. The spider's small feet lost their traction on the material of his shirt—soaked with sweat from his earlier exertions—and flew towards the small woman behind the counter.

Terrified, reacting on instinct, she threw the vat of oil in her hands towards it. The oil hit the tarantula, plastering the creature's many tiny hairs against its body and blocking up its airways, killing it in an instant.

And the oil continued, past the spider, to splash onto the open fire of the grate. A great orange gout of flame shot up. Clouds of black smoke billowed towards the ceiling and instantly set off the fire alarms, a deafening, howling cacophony which drowned out the woman's screams.

Jimmy had been working at the restaurant for a month, earning minimum wage as a short order chef, a shitty job in a shitty place. But before that he'd been inside, serving seven to ten for a bungled hold-up that had left the store clerk bleeding to death on the floor. This job had been about the only one he could find, and he was determined not to lose it.

The one thing that crossed his mind as he saw the flames bloom into life was that if the restaurant burned down he'd have nowhere to work and then he'd probably lose his new apartment that the prison outreach services had found for him and Cal had asked him if he'd help out on a job, a robbery, and he'd said no last week but now he'd probably have to say yes and Cal was a fuck-up of the first order so the job would probably go wrong and Jimmy would end up right back in the joint where he'd started.

Faster than anyone else could act, faster than he'd ever acted in his life, he ran to the sink, filled up a bucket of water and threw it straight over the burning oil.

Only after he'd done this did dim childhood memories of being told that you should never put water on an oil fire float to the surface of his mind.

By that time, the water had splashed the burning oil in a wide arc over the counter and into the main body of the restaurant.

Crouching on the floor behind the counter, Peter saw the flames take hold on the floor behind him, cutting him off from the exit towards which all the other customers were fleeing.

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Kate, Louise and Danny had run the length of the zoo, searching frantically for Peter, but it was a big place and hardly surprising they hadn't had much luck finding him. It finally occurred to them to put a message out over the public address system when the sound of the fire alarm began to blare out through the green acres of the zoo. In their cages, animals sat bolt upright, senses on instant alert, primal reactions to danger that hadn't been used once during their cozy, cushioned imprisonment sparking into life.

Danny didn't know why, but he was absolutely certain that the siren had something to do with Peter. He swerved in his tracks and set off in the direction of the noise. Behind him, he could hear Kate and Louise doing the same thing.

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James was just... there, at that moment that made him squint up his eyes and wonder if anything else in his life had ever felt this good. Then Bodil took her mouth away.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hissed as she scrambled to her feet. He couldn't believe she'd stopped now, when he was so close.

"Can you hear that?" she said.

"I can't hear anything!" he said, but he realized that he could. Echoing through the dark room was the sound of a fire alarm.

"I think we'd better get out of here," Bodil said. Any trace of seduction was gone from her voice. It was all business now. She turned and jogged out of the chamber without a backwards glance.

James struggled to follow, trying to zip himself up over his enormous and painful erection as he went. Just fucking typical, he thought.

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The heat inside the restaurant was unbelievable. Peter had read in textbooks about how quickly a fire could spread, but seeing it in action was something else entirely. He felt as if all the oxygen was being sucked out of his lungs and he could smell the horrible scent of the hairs scorching on his head. His eyes were watering but he knew with a terrible certainty that soon enough they'd dry out and then boil in his skull.

He dropped to the floor, falling into the fetal position, but even as he did it he was aware that it was futile, that the fragile flesh and bones of his back could offer him no protection against this supernova heat.

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Kate, Danny and Louise ran past the great enclosure where the antelope and zebras ranged freely, oblivious to the human drama going on in front of them. They no longer had to rely on the noise of the alarm to guide them. The fire itself was visible; great columns of flame leaping up into the sky, so bright they outshone even the summer sun.

As Kate saw the burning wreckage of the restaurant, she froze for a moment and her hands unclenched involuntarily, so that her bag fell unnoticed onto the ground beside her. The place was an inferno. It seemed impossible that anyone could have survived it.

Then she realized that a figure was running, stumbling away from the fire towards them. Covered as it was in black soot stains it took a moment for her to recognize it as Mary-Beth. She was shouting something, which gradually resolved itself into the sound of Peter's name. "He's in there!" Mary-Beth said and now she was only a few paces away, Kate could see the tracks of tears where they'd slid down her cheeks, clearing the black soot away and exposing the pale skin beneath. "Peter's trapped in there!"

"Oh shit!" Danny said. Kate could see him make a move towards the blazing building, but then he stopped himself. It was pointless. No one would be getting out of there alive.

She heard the sound of sirens and realized that the fire service was screaming towards the restaurant, but it seemed to her that they were far too late.

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At first Peter thought that he was hallucinating, or maybe dead already. The dark figures moved through the flames towards him like divers in a sea of fire, like fallen angels. But his lungs were still choked with smoke, and he could feel the greasy, gritty texture of the ashes on his skin, scalding hot, and he knew that he was still trapped, helplessly, in reality.

Then he felt something, a sudden blessed easing of the intolerable heat. For a moment it felt like a cool breeze, blowing improbably

through the inferno around him, but after a second the moisture soaked through his clothes to touch his skin and he realized that it was water. At the same moment, he recognized the dark figures. They were firefighters. He could see the massive hose they were carrying between them, the intense jet of water whose backlash was cooling his own skin.

Still, there was a wall of fire between them and him. The flames were licking towards his feet and the firefighters and their hose were still ten feet away. Peter would die with rescue tantalizingly close.

Then, amazingly, one of them sprinted forward, straight towards Peter, straight through the flames. He landed lithely on his feet, grabbed Peter's arm and slung him over his shoulder as carelessly and effortlessly as if he were a rag doll. As soon as Peter was in position the fireman began to spring back towards the exit, vaulting over the flames as he went. He paused outside the restaurant only long enough to dump Peter on his feet, then headed straight back inside. Peter hadn't even got a good look at his rescuer, just a glimpse of pale blue eyes and a bulbous nose framed inside the wide sweep of his helmet.

For a second, standing outside in the fresh air, Peter didn't know what to do with himself. He'd been so certain he was going to die that life for a moment felt like an unexpected and unwanted gift. But a moment later his self-preservation instincts kicked in and he realized that the fire was still raging dangerously close behind him. Gathering his wits, he sprinted as far away from it as possible, towards the clear ground around the gazelle enclosure.

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Danny couldn't believe that Peter had made it. For a moment, as he'd seen the firefighter carry Peter out of the restaurant, he hadn't believed his eyes. As soon as he realized who it was he'd started calling out Peter's name, with Louise and Kate's voices joining in beside him, but Peter seemed oblivious. Not that it mattered; he was away from the fire and safe. Behind him, Danny could hear the

squealing tires as another fire engine pulled up. Two men jumped out and began to run full pelt towards the building.

But they didn't see Kate's small bag, nestled on the floor behind Danny. As one of them ran towards the restaurant, his booted foot caught the bag and sent it flying in a clean arc towards the fire.

Kate let out a cry of distress, but the fireman just cursed and kept on running.

To Danny's left, Peter was slowing to a halt, a few feet from the low fence of the savannah enclosure. A zebra, wandering close by, turned a beady black eye on him. A little further out, a herd of gazelles—perhaps thinking that food was on its way—swerved from its course and began to head towards Peter too.

Outside the restaurant, another line of firefighters was approaching, the anaconda-length of a hose held firmly between them, directing its high-pressure water towards the slowly diminishing fire. They were all concentrating on the job at hand, all their focus on controlling the hose that writhed in their arms like a living thing.

They didn't see Kate's bag as it flew through the air towards them. The bag struck the ground just beneath the toe of the leading fireman's boot.

Unprepared, his foot twisted out from under him and the hose jerked round to the right, spitting water viciously towards the crowd of spectators behind Danny who'd come to gawk at the blaze. One small woman caught the full brunt of the water and was thrown backwards a good ten feet by the power of it.

The fireman realized what was happening, and Danny saw a look of panic come over his face followed by a look of intense effort as he wrenched the hose back round and away from the crowd. Then, just as it was reaching its center point, a chill breeze seemed to blow across the forecourt. For a moment, the hose seemed to form a complex shadow on the ground behind it, some kind of long-legged animal. The unexpected breeze flew the hose too far, or maybe the fireman just overcompensated, and instead of swinging round to the fire, the spray of water lashed towards Peter.

At the last moment, the fireman's feet tangled in the strap of Kate's bag beneath him. He fell to his knees just as the water hit Peter square in the middle of his chest.

Peter felt the force of the impact like a blow. Because of the angle, because the fireman was kneeling, the force of it threw him back and up, straight over the fence separating him from the fake savannah filled with zebras and gazelles.

He had a moment to enjoy the sensation of flying, like he was on some kind of crazy fairground ride. He was shocked, but not really scared. At the height of his trajectory he was never more than fifteen feet above the ground. The fall wouldn't really hurt him, not onto the grass of the enclosure.

Except, he realized at the last moment as he looked down, he wasn't going to fall onto the grass. At the exact moment the fireman finally managed to switch off the jet of water, Peter was directly above one of the ten or so gazelles dotted around the enclosure.

It gazed up at him with startled, soft brown eyes. Then, just as he began his descent, it dropped its head and continued to calmly munch the grass.

In that position, its two long, lethally sharp horns were exactly lined up with Peter's stomach. He tried, frantically, to twist out of the way, but there was no purchase for his flailing arms in the air, nothing for him to push against. All he succeeded in doing was twisting round so that his back was to the gazelle's horns and his eyes were staring up, desperately, at the clear blank blue of the sky.

The horns struck one to either side of his spine. If they'd hit a rib, they would probably have been deflected, glancing harmlessly off him to leave little more than a scratch. But they didn't. As if by design, they slid precisely into the space between his third and fourth ribs. There, they punctured the skin with ease, then slid through the greasy subcutaneous layer of fat before finding the spongy gray tissue of his lungs and punching straight through them. The oxygen, so carefully stored in all the little cavities inside them, hissed out around the horns like air from a punctured tire. Then, finally, the horns punched out through the top of his chest, slick with his blood and the fluids stored in that most vital region of his body.

Peter didn't die immediately. When he felt the impact, he had time to look down and see the twin ivory towers pointing upwards improbably through his body. Only a second later, the pain hit, so excruciating that he couldn't believe he could suffer it, go on suffering it and still not lose consciousness.

And then he did begin to fade, his vision graying out as his brain failed to find the oxygen in his blood that would allow it to function. He lost sight of the blood-drenched horns and his head fell back so that his eyes were pointed at the sky but they could no longer see it. In his last moments, Peter tried to remember a prayer, something from childhood that could be his last thought and moment on earth. But only one line kept echoing through his head, "The valley of the shadow of death." And then even that faded.

# SEVEN

Louise was scared. She didn't want to admit it, to the other students, to Danny, or most importantly to herself, but she was shit scared. She couldn't believe Peter had died. She couldn't believe how Peter had died. Even after the conversation with Danny and Kate a small part of her had kept on doubting. All that talk about death being out to get them, it was just too way out there. The kind of thing you made up at camp to scare the other kids in your cabin.

But now she absolutely, one hundred percent knew it was true. That was why, when Danny was telling the others what he and Kate thought, while they all sat drinking the coffee in plastic cups that the zoo staff had brought them, she didn't bother listening. She didn't need any further convincing. But she could see in James's face that he did.

"But isn't it all just a crashing coincidence?" he said. His voice was shaky, and his normally coffee-colored face was pale and bloodless, even though by the time he and Bodil had arrived from wherever they'd been Peter's body was safely under a blanket inside an ambulance.

"Pretty fucking improbable coincidence," Louise said contemptuously, ignoring the fact that she'd been arguing pretty much the same thing not that long ago.

"You're saying, I don't know, that death is out to get us and it's got some list that we're all on. I'd say that's a lot more improbable," he shot back. "Look, I know we're all upset. First the accident, then Rinoka, and now Peter. It's no wonder we're not thinking straight."

"Fine." Louise realized that her hands were clenched into fists and carefully unclenched them. "I tell you what, why don't we wait till the next person dies and then you can decide whether that's improbable enough for you."

Mary-Beth, huddled under a red blanket that one of the paramedics had given her, suddenly looked up, her eyes sharp behind a veneer of sorrow. "And who is next?" she asked Kate. "What was the next name on your list?"

Kate looked at Danny, and Louise could see them both mentally debating whether to tell everyone. It suddenly occurred to her that she didn't know. That it might be her who was next. A cold shiver of fear started at the base of her spine and ended somewhere in the region of her eyeballs.

"It doesn't matter," Danny said eventually. "Because there isn't going to be a next person. We cheated death once; we can do it again. And Kate seems to be plugged in to the whole thing too. Between us we should be able to figure out how to predict what's going to happen and then stop it."

"But won't Death just try again, like it did with Rinoka?" Bodil asked. She looked more serious than Louise had ever seen her, her lips narrowed into a thin, worried line and her blonde hair plastered to her head with sweat.

"No," Kate said. "I'm sure there's a way to beat this once and for all. We just have to figure it out."

"How?" James asked disparagingly.

Kate shrugged. "We could start with the Internet. Maybe you aren't the first people this has happened to. I mean, there's been plenty of times when people have had premonitions of disaster. If we can figure out what happened to them, maybe we can figure out how to..." She seemed to hesitate, as if unwilling to name their problem.

"To get Death off our backs," Danny finished firmly. "But there's no Internet connection at our hotel."

"Then come to my apartment," Kate said, then Louise saw her blush as if she'd realized that what she said sounded like a proposition. From the expression on Danny's face Louise guessed that he might have liked it to be. Whatever. Kate was far too old for him and anyway they needed to be concentrating on more important things.

"And what about the rest of us?" James asked. "I know, maybe we could hang around the cemetery, see if death wants to pop along and give us any visions of our own."

Louise saw Danny take a deep breath, clearly forcing himself not to snap back at the English boy. "I'll go with Kate and do some research. We're the ones who had the visions so we're the ones who ought to be

able to figure this out. The rest of you go back to the hotel, stay there and stay away from anything dangerous until I get back. If we don't put ourselves at risk, death shouldn't be able to get us."

"All right," Mary-Beth said, her voice suddenly much firmer than it had been. "I'll take the other children back and I'll look after them, but you have to tell me whose name was next on the list." She looked challengingly at Kate, and then at Danny, her eyes filled with steely resolve. "We have a right to know."

But Danny shrugged. "I can't tell you. After the first two deaths it all happened so fast I don't know who went next." He looked at Kate.

She hesitated a moment longer. "The next name on the list was Jack Cohen," she said finally, looking straight at James.

James looked back, baffled. "My name's James Barker," he pointed out.

Kate looked round. "Then which of you is Jack Cohen?"

"None of us," Danny said, suddenly looking doubtful, as if the whole edifice on which he'd built his theory was crumbling away.

But Louise snapped her fingers. "The old man! The one who got off the train with us; it must be him."

"Shit! I forgot all about him." Danny shook his head. "He could be anywhere by now."

"The hospital should have records," Kate said, "if they gave him any treatment." She looked conflicted, clearly keen to go to her apartment with Danny.

"Don't worry," Louise said, "I'll go to the hospital and find out, you two go back to her place and get researching and the rest of you hole up in the hotel."

"But the hospital won't give out details to anyone who isn't family," Kate said.

Louise grinned at her. "That's okay, I'll lie."

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Danny felt full of a nervous sort of energy. It was something to do with having a purpose again, knowing what needed to be done and setting about doing it. But it also had something to do with Kate.



He couldn't help it, he knew it was completely inappropriate and the worst timing in the world, but he felt like he was falling for her. He wasn't sure why, since he hardly knew her and while she was certainly pretty he couldn't honestly say she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. But there you had it.

"So, tell me about yourself," he said to her as they sat in the back of the cab they were riding to her apartment on the Upper East Side. Neither of them had even suggested taking the subway.

Kate looked at him, her eyebrows kinked up beneath a curtain of hair. "Tell you what about me?"

He shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. "Oh, you know. Stuff. Where you grew up. What you like doing in your free time; your favorite color of M&M. That sort of thing."

She smiled. "Chicago, I'm a med student so I don't have any free time, and blue. And I have a boyfriend."

"Oh." He looked out of the window for a moment, as the low-rise cityscape of Harlem swept by outside, and was surprised at how much her answer hurt. After a while he looked back at her. "How long have you been together?"

"Five years." She didn't say it, though, as if they'd been five wonderful years. "How about you?"

"I'm young, free and single." He smiled what he hoped was a rakish smile. "But I'm willing to change at least two of those."

She laughed, good-naturedly. It made the silky material of her top slide over the soft contours of her breasts. He wrenched his eyes away from them with an effort. "And just how young are you?" she asked.

"I'm eighteen. I'm starting school at NYU in the fall."

"Really? I graduated Columbia over a year ago. I'm twenty-three." Then she seemed to realize the conversation they were having and her expression became darker and more guarded. "Anyway, haven't we got more important things to worry about?"

"I guess," Danny said. But then after a moment added, "You know what? No we haven't. The most important thing is having as good a time as possible because if we don't find what we're looking for then these may be the last few hours left. And I'm damned if I'm going to

spend them acting like a fucking cloud of doom is hanging over my head."

She did smile again at that, but it was a more half-hearted expression than earlier, failing to dig the deep dimples into her cheeks that he'd seen before. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die?"

"Yeah," Danny said. "Something like that."

She shook her head. "I used to think that, until I started working on the wards. Then I realized that the nearer you are to death, the harder it is to ignore. It's like... a great dark shadow that stretches backward from the moment itself. And for a while before it happens, you can't see anything else."

Danny was still trying to think of an answer to that when the cab drew up outside her apartment block.

It was one of those anonymous late twentieth-century affairs that probably cost the earth but didn't look like anything special. It didn't seem to suit her at all. He was so busy staring up at it, wondering how someone with so much personality could live somewhere with so little that he almost ran into the man waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

He was huge. Not just tall, though he certainly was, but wide too, and while a lot of it was fat there was muscle bulging out underneath it. His face ran straight into his shoulders with barely a hint of neck. Danny found himself taking an involuntary step backwards. The man studied them closely out of bullet-like eyes buried in deep folds of flesh.

"You Kate Shelley?" he said to Kate after a moment. He'd clearly already decided that she was.

Kate also took a step away, though she still had to crane her neck to look up at the man's face. "Why?"

The man took a step nearer, pressing her back with his mountain of flesh right up against the wall of the steps. "You and me have gotta talk," he said. He flicked a glance at Danny. "In private."

Danny felt a surge of anger. He hated bullying, always had. And he didn't like seeing that look of fear on Kate's face. "Back off!" he said, pushing himself forward till he was in the stranger's face.

The man looked at him, frowning, seemingly more puzzled than angered by the challenge "Take it easy, pal, I only wanna talk to her," he said, his rumbling voice so full of menace that it made "talking" sound like a lethal activity.

"Well, she doesn't want to talk to you," Danny said.

The man's eyes narrowed till they all but disappeared beneath his lowering brows. He leaned forward, towering over Danny. "I'd stay out of other people's business if I was you, sonny."

Danny felt his heart rate speed up, but he schooled his expression into one of arrogant nonchalance. "Listen, my friend, you're making a very big mistake," he said, trying to make his voice as strong and confident as possible. "Why don't you walk away before you do something we'll both regret?" He let his hand drift down towards the back of his jeans, where his piece would have been hidden—if, of course, he'd been carrying one. Like any decent actor—and nearly two decades of making excuses for his sister had turned him into a pretty good one—he didn't oversell the move. It was subtle, as if he didn't want it to be noticed.

The man bought it. He backed hurriedly away from Kate and Danny, hands half-raised in a placatory gesture. "All right, take it easy." He walked back until he was standing at the bottom of the steps, his hands still held carefully away from his jacket. As if he was deliberately not going for his piece. Danny felt an icy flush of fear at the thought that he might actually have one.

Without waiting to see the man leave, Danny grabbed Kate's hand in his left one, keeping his right one hovering near where his gun was supposed to be and pulled her into the lobby of the building.

They were all the way into her apartment before they said anything, and then to Danny's surprise Kate started laughing, falling backwards into the sofa as she did. "Wow, how many episodes of *The Sopranos* have you watched?" she said when she'd got her breathing under control.

Danny blushed. "Yeah, but I got rid of him, didn't I?" He settled into the sofa as well, as close beside her as he could get away with. "Who was he, anyway?"

The amusement quickly faded from her face. "I don't know. I think he was asking for me at the hospital." Her voice was tense and shaky. Then she shrugged, as if consciously dismissing her worries. "Maybe he was with the Jehovah's Witnesses."

Tim kept watching the building long after Kate Shelley and her young bodyguard had disappeared inside it. He'd been starting to think, after the questions he'd asked at the hospital, that Shelley really was nothing more than a med student. It seemed pretty implausible that someone like her would be connected in any way. He'd begun to think that she might have told the boss he was going to get shot for some kind of twisted joke, or because she was going crazy. People at the hospital certainly seemed to think that she'd been acting odd in the last two days.

But now, after he'd seen the muscle she had with her, he wasn't so sure. No one took protection around with them, unless they had something or someone to fear. He could have taken the young goon out, but he hadn't wanted a public encounter; too many eyes on the street to see. And anyway, why take any risk at all when you can come back later with reinforcements and make sure the odds are stacked even more in your favor?

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When Louise got to the hospital, many of the staff were clustered round the reception desk, watching a small portable television and no one seemed particularly interested in talking to her.

It took Louise a moment to register that what they were watching was a news channel showing footage of the fire at the zoo. She could see the burning building filling the center of the screen. It sent an unexpected jolt of fear down her spine. Even more so when she heard the anchor start talking in that annoyingly low I've-got-something-tragic-to-tell-you anchor voice about the one fatality of the fire, a young German tourist killed in a freak accident. Apparently the firefighters were going to hold a full investigation. Because that was really going to help Peter now, Louise thought bitterly.

One of the other people watching the screen also seemed to be agitated by what he saw. He was a good-looking guy, in a bland kind of way, probably only a few years older than Louise.

"The only fatality," he was saying now. "What does that mean? Does that mean other people were hurt but not killed?"

One of the people behind the counter looked at him thoughtfully. "What's the matter, Brad? Someone you know at the zoo today?"

"Yeah," he said, "Kate had a... a day off and she went there. I haven't heard from her since."

"Kate Shelley?" another guy asked.

The man called Brad nodded. "Shit!" he said again and Louise could see that he was on the point of rushing out of the door, even though he was wearing a doctor's white coat and was probably in the middle of his shift.

"It's okay," Louise said to him. "Kate's okay."

Everyone watching the TV turned to stare at her.

"Who are you?" Brad asked, his tone unfriendly.

Louise smiled. "I'm no one, but I was at the zoo today when the fire broke out and I know that Kate's okay because she's gone back to her apartment with my brother."

She'd expected her words to calm the man, but instead he gave her a lethal look then turned round and rushed out of the room anyway. Oh well, try to do a good turn.

"Is that why you're here?" the woman behind the counter asked, settling back in now that the news had moved on to report on a garbage workers' dispute on Staten Island.

"No..." Louise said slowly. She realized that she hadn't straightened out her story in her head the way she'd intended. "I'm here about Jack Cohen."

"Right." The woman was all business again. "When was he admitted?" She bent to her computer terminal.

"He wasn't," Louise said hurriedly. "At least I don't think he was. But he was treated here and I was hoping you'd have his home address."

Now the woman looked at her with deep suspicion. "Why would you need that?"

"I'm his granddaughter," Louise improvised.

The woman's eyes narrowed, scanning Louise's button nose and mussed sandy hair. "You don't look very Jewish to me."

"Oh, everyone always says that," Louise drawled, buying herself time. Then inspiration struck. "My dad married out." She was proud of herself for remembering the phrase, something she'd once heard Rachel Landau saying.

"Okay," the woman said. She had, Louise noticed, very blunt fingers, with fingernails, which had been gnawed down to the quick. "But if you're his granddaughter, why don't you know his address?"

Louise had just thought of this herself. "Big family feud," she said quickly, knowing that a spontaneous but far-fetched answer was usually better than a convincing one that seemed to have taken a few seconds to think up.

The woman twitched an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah," Louise said, "after the—you know—marriage, granddad cut off all ties with the family. We lost touch, didn't know where he was. But then yesterday we saw about the crash, and there was a picture of granddad and we knew he must have been sent to the hospital so mom sent me here to see if I can track him down because I'm studying at NYU and he hasn't got long left, probably, and we don't want him to die without us ever seeing him again." She realized that she hadn't breathed once during the whole of the last sentence.

But the receptionist was looking slightly less dubious. She glanced down at a sheet of paper in front of her. "So, if you're family, where was he born?" she said.

"Germany," Louise guessed wildly. "He came over after Krystallnacht." That was something else she'd heard of in history class, though she wasn't entirely sure when it had happened. She looked apprehensively at the receptionist.

The receptionist smiled broadly back. "That's a really touching story," she said, and Louise was rather startled to see that the woman was tearing up. Then she wrote down the address on a piece of paper and handed it to Louise. Louise had to work very hard not to let out a whoop of triumph.

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Danny and Kate soon discovered that if you put "death" and "premonition" into Google you got one hell of a lot of hits. They tried to narrow down the search, but even adding words like "crash" or "vision" or "narrow escape from" still brought up thousands of possible web pages.

In the end, they chose one almost at random. It was a news story about a boat wreck on the Danube. A cruise ship had gone out of control and ploughed into the bank and fifty people had been killed, but four had been saved because they'd jumped off the boat a few minutes before it crashed. One of the survivors claimed to have foreseen the disaster in a dream the night before. And that was pretty much all it said.

Danny frowned at the screen for a while, then said, "Try looking up the names of the survivors on Google."

Kate typed them in. Then sat looking at the list of pages, frozen. She didn't need to click through to read the full articles. The headlines told enough of the story: "Wreck survivor killed in freak accident;" "Girl survives drowning only to burn to death;" "Tree falls on boat crash survivor in unexplained lightning storm."

Danny swallowed. "Okay," he said, his voice rusty. "Try some of the other pages."

There were plenty of them. There was a plane crash in the Andean jungle. One passenger had got off before the plane flew, claiming that a vision had shown him it wasn't safe, but a week later he'd been found dead in his home. He seemed to have tripped near his stove, somehow fallen with his head in a saucepan of water, managed to boil himself alive while he was unconscious.

In Britain, an old woman whose premonition of disaster led her to leave her house before the entire building collapsed had died a day later when her dog pulled her in the path of a ten-ton truck. The dog had been frightened by the detonation of a starter pistol in a race at a nearby school's sports day. The sports day was supposed to have happened a week earlier, but the teacher who was organizing it broke his leg and the school delayed the competition to find a replacement.

The teacher broke his leg slipping on an ice cube from a drink that someone had spilled outside the local pub. A whole string of coincidences...

In the Ukraine, a young boy escaped from a car crash only to be crushed to death beneath a runaway train.

In Spain, a young mother saved herself and her baby from a serial murderer when a premonition told her where he'd be waiting. Two days later, her family buried them both. They'd broken their necks in a ten-foot fall from a second-story window.

In Texas, a man fled from a drive-by and was accidentally shot by his own son.

In San Diego, a woman who escaped a fire drowned in a flood.

After a while, Danny felt he'd seen enough, more than enough, certainly more than he'd wanted to see. "Stop," he said. "We're not learning anything we don't already know."

Kate sat back from the keyboard, rubbing the kinks out of her neck with a pale white hand. Danny noticed how long and tapered her fingers were, like an artist's or a pianist's. Or a skeleton's. "Any chance of a coffee?" he asked to stop himself sinking into a downward thought spiral. He'd been so hopeful they'd be able to find something straight away, some answer to their problems. But there'd been nothing hopeful in those web pages.

Kate made him a drink, seemingly glad of the distraction, and Danny took the time to glance around the flat. It was immediately apparent that she shared it with someone. With a man. Well, what did he expect if they'd been going out together five years? In fact, it looked more like it was the guy's flat and that Kate just stayed here on his sufferance. There was something very masculine about the place, about the sleek silver surfaces, the sound system so expensive it only appeared to have one big black button and a lot of green lights, and the complete absence of anything green or living.

"This your boyfriend's place?" he asked Kate as she emerged from the kitchen.

She looked taken aback. "What makes you say that?"

Danny waved an arm around. "It kinda lacks the feminine touch."

Kate laughed. "Right. And you'd know all about that because...?"



"Hey, I've got a twin sister," he protested. "She's like my very own feminine side."

"You're sister's about the least feminine person I've ever seen," Kate said, smiling to show it wasn't meant as an insult. "And I say that as someone who only met her twenty-four hours ago."

"Yeah," Danny agreed. "Sometimes I think she's my masculine half."

"You're close, aren't you?"

This wasn't the sort of conversation Danny was used to having. The only feeling he and his high school buddies usually talked about was the kind you had when you got a cheerleader in a quiet corner. But he liked the fact that Kate was talking to him this way, like a fellow adult who wouldn't be uncomfortable discussing his emotions. So he said, "Yeah, I guess we are, but in the kind of way that you never think about, you know?"

Kate nodded. "Yeah. Like a relationship that's been going on so long you..." she trailed off, as if realizing what she was about to say.

"Take each other for granted?" Danny suggested.

Kate hesitated. "In a way," she said after a moment. "It's like anything you see every day, you stop actually seeing it. You find you're interacting with your memory of the thing, the person. Acting like it hasn't changed and never will."

"But people do change." Danny imagined Louise, after a year at San Diego, and how different she might be. Then he laughed, because he couldn't imagine Louise ever being any different at all.

"What?" Kate asked, frowning at him.

"Nothing. Just... thinking how some people never do change."

The change of tone seemed to jolt Kate out of her reverie. "I don't know why I'm talking to you about this," she said.

"Sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger," Danny supplied.

Kate grinned at him. "Did you hear that in a film?"

Danny smiled back. "*The Bold and the Beautiful*. My mom's addicted to it."

There was a moment of warmth, and almost tension, when Danny thought that Kate was connecting with him the way she would with

any other person, maybe even a person she liked. But then she sighed and went back to the computer desk.

"I guess we'd better make a list of all the key words we can think of and work our way through them."

Danny nodded—then snapped his fingers. "List. That's what you saw, wasn't it? A list of names." Kate nodded. And then he continued, knowing somehow with absolute certainty that this was right. "Look up 'Death's list.' Just put in 'Death's list' and see what it says."

Kate looked at him, and he could tell from her expression that she saw something disturbing in his face, because her own paled slightly. Then she put her fingers on the keyboard and typed in what he'd said.

As usual, about a thousand different websites came up. But Danny saw the name of the first one and he knew that it was right. "Click through to that," he told Kate.

She did as he told her. Immediately, the screen darkened to black. Then, out of the blackness, a white dot appeared, like something seen in the distance but growing closer and closer. It was a skull, and very soon it had filled the whole of the screen.

"Fucking flash animations," Danny said, but he knew his voice was a little shaky. A moment later, the screen blanked out entirely to a limitless white. Then, so suddenly and so loudly that Kate and Danny both jumped, a voice blared out of the speakers. "You're on the List," the voice said, seeming to echo hollowly, as if the room had taken on the acoustic contours of a cave. "Once you're on, there's only one way off it. It's Death's Design."

Then the screen exploded in a splash of scarlet—and then it blanked back to white and a second later they were thrown back to the search page from Google.

They were still staring at it in horror when the door to the apartment was flung open and Brad strode in.

# EIGHT

Jack Cohen lived on the Upper West Side, just below the Lincoln Center. Louise stopped for a moment outside his apartment to stare up at the red brick facade of it, fretted with ironwork and thought that she'd never get used to New York. All the buildings were attached to each other. It was freaky, as if the residents didn't have the same concept of personal space as the rest of the country. She couldn't imagine Danny fitting in here at all.

She rang the bell for apartment number four—the place was too small to have a concierge—then waited, then waited some more, but it didn't seem like he was in. She was just starting to walk away when the intercom crackled and a voice that sounded as dry as a husk called through, "Whatever it is, I'm not buying."

Louise turned back to the intercom. "That's fine, I'm not selling anything. Can I come in and talk, Mr Cohen?"

She could almost hear the suspicious frown in his voice. "Why should I let you in my home, young lady?"

"Because I was in the train crash with you," Louise said.

There was no further reply, but she heard the buzz of the door being released. "I'll just guess what floor it's on, then?" she muttered, and trudged inside.

Passing through the scruffy communal stairwell, she made her way up three flights to the top floor apartment. She paused there to look through the window, which gave a fantastic view down 73rd straight to Central Park. From up here, it was easier to see what Danny saw in New York, why he might want to spend three years of his life here. The place seemed fractal; always ready to yield up more detail, more strangeness, giving more the closer you looked.

"That's the memorial garden for John Lennon up there," a voice suddenly said from beside her elbow. She looked round, then down, to see the wizened, silver-haired form of the old man she vaguely remembered from the nightmarish scene of the crash. "I remember the day he was shot," he said sadly.

"I wasn't born the day he was shot," Louise said. "Can I come in?"

Mr Cohen—he was just too old for her to think of him as Jack—made her a cup of coffee, rich and strong, before they said anything. Now that he'd established she wasn't hawking anything, he seemed willing to be hospitable. But he also seemed oddly uncurious about why she was there.

"It's about the crash," she said eventually, though she imagined that was pretty obvious.

He nodded, bright eyes looking sharply up at her from his seat on the couch. "That was quite something."

Louise laughed, her first real laugh since it had happened. "Yeah. Yeah, it was."

Mr Cohen grinned, revealing grimy, gappy teeth. "I've never been so terrified in my whole life. And I was married to a girl from New Jersey, so I know what real fear is."

"I was shitting myself," Louise admitted for the first time, then realized that perhaps this wasn't the best language to use in front of a ninety-something old Jewish guy. "Sorry."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Bubele, at least in your case it was metaphorical. Wait till you get to my age."

Louise found to her surprise that she liked him immensely. She suddenly didn't want to have to tell him what she had to tell him. And she particularly didn't like the idea that he was somehow next on the list. But now there was a silence and she knew that she had to fill it by telling him the real reason for her visit. "Well..." she said.

He looked at her, head tilted to the side. "That's never something people say before good news." At her hesitation, he shook his head. "Look at it this way, the longer you leave it before telling me, the worse I'm going to assume it is. Another few minutes and I might keel over from a heart attack just from apprehension."

Louise smiled, slightly, but his words were too uncomfortably close to the truth. "I'm not worried about frightening you, I'm worried about you thinking I'm crazy."

He smiled back, more genuinely. "I'm alive today because some guy I'd never met before had a dream about an accident he couldn't possibly have known anything about." Off her look, he added, "Oh, I heard about what he told the cops, but I heard you talking too so I

know that was a load of bull. My world's already been turned upside down. Anything you say could only put it right again."

"It isn't over," Louise said.

"Yeah?" He looked only faintly puzzled.

"Look, this is going to sound really dumb..." He gestured to her to go on. "Okay, then. My brother, the guy who had the vision, he thinks that because we escaped the accident when we shouldn't have, death is out to get us."

"And what makes him think that?" he asked neutrally.

"Mainly the fact that it's already killed two of the other survivors."

Mr Cohen, who might have been old but wasn't slow, got it immediately. "And you think I'm next."

Louise grimaced. "It seems to be coming after people in the order they would have died if they hadn't got off the train."

He looked at her for a long time in silence. She didn't say anything more, not sure what to say. She wondered if this was what it was like for doctors when they had to give someone the news that their cancer was terminal.

Then he shrugged. "Well, thanks for letting me know."

For a moment, Louise was so taken aback she didn't know how to respond. Then she said, "It's okay. We think we can beat it, but Danny wants you to come back to the hotel with us where we can all keep an eye out for each other."

He looked dubious. "Keep an eye out for Death? Now that does sound crazy."

"No, you see, the way the other two died—" she decided it was best not to go into details, "—it was like these strings of really unlikely coincidences. It was as if... as if Death was using the normal world against them."

"So you're saying if I stayed here I might end up electrocuted by my cappuccino maker when it falls into the bathtub?"

"Yeah. Kind of."

He shrugged again. "Okay. I guess that's gotta be better than getting some disease and spending my last few months in the hospital rotting away from the inside and peeing into a bowl."

Louise realized that he had no intention of coming with her. She hadn't expected this. "But that might never happen. I mean, you might just drop dead of a heart attack."

"Here's hoping," he said dryly.

She ignored him. "And even if you didn't, you could have years to go yet. You're in good shape." She glanced round the apartment, with its overstuffed red leather armchairs, its profusion of knickknacks and pictures of smiling children, faces smeared with ice cream, and the collection of vinyl records and even some CDs which she guessed might have been a present from those same children. "It seems like you've got a pretty nice life. Do you really want to just give up?"

"Do you know how old I am?" he asked, hunching forward in his chair so she could get a good look at the parchment-thin skin of his face.

Louise knew it was polite to underestimate but she'd never worried about hurting people's feelings and anyway she suspected he wanted an honest answer. "Ninety, I guess."

He shook his head. "In two months' time I'm going to be a hundred. I've lived through almost a whole century. Do you have any idea how much the world's changed in my lifetime? How strange it all seems to me now?"

"Well," Louise said, "it still freaks me out whenever I see one of those new mini iPods."

His eyes grew distant, seeming to recede into the wrinkled folds of his face. "When I grew up in Germany, no one even had cars. There was no television. When we were kids we used to follow behind the milk cart and collect the dung from the horse that pulled it to use on our gardens. I came here in nineteen thirty-five and I thought it was the most amazing place I'd ever seen. It was like a city of the future. There were automobiles everywhere and the buildings... In my lifetime I've seen the World Trade Centre built and I've seen it destroyed. I've voted for FDR and heard Martin Luther King speak. My first wife died in nineteen seventy-three, and my second in eighty-nine. I've got four children, fourteen grandchildren and I've always lived by the principle that you should regret what you do, not what you don't."

He'd been leaning forward intently as he spoke. Now he sighed, as if he was tired, and leaned back. "I've done enough. If it's my time, then I'm ready."

Louise found an unexpected lump in her throat. "But what about your kids and your grandkids? Do you think they're ready?"

He smiled, wide and joyful. She could imagine the same look on his face as a young man when he'd landed on Ellis Island and seen Manhattan's amazing skyline for the first time. "Are you kidding? They've been waiting for me to leave them this apartment for fifteen years. You gotta understand—there's family loyalty and then there's rent control."

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Danny stood on the sidewalk outside Kate's apartment, looking up at what he guessed was her window and wondering whether he should try to get back in. He'd been so surprised when Kate's boyfriend, Brad, had turned up, that he'd allowed the other man to bundle him unceremoniously out of the apartment and slam the door behind him before he could think of trying to stop him. Kate had protested loudly as he was doing it that there was nothing going on and Danny had joined in but he knew he'd sounded half-hearted because he'd wanted something to be going on, so he didn't think either of them had convinced Brad.

For a moment, a figure was outlined in the window, haloed by the light of the setting sun. Danny couldn't tell if it was Brad or Kate. The figure's arm looked as if it was raised and he felt a momentary flash of apprehension that it was Brad and he was about to hit Kate. Only Kate hadn't looked much like a battered wife, and she hadn't seemed the type to let a guy beat up on her. She was probably making up with Brad right now, Danny decided, glad that the annoying teenager had disappeared from her life.

He sighed and turned away from the apartment, trotting down the steps and through the scaffolding on a nearby building that blocked half the sidewalk. It was time he got back to the others. Kate, after all, wasn't on Death's List—and they were. As he thought this, he

remembered the strange website he'd found with its disturbing message and he quickened his pace.

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Inside the apartment, Brad was the closest to losing it that Kate had ever seen him. "What is going on, Kate?" he yelled. "I'm worried sick about you, thinking something terrible has happened to you on your fucking stupid expedition to the zoo and instead you're back here cozying up with some high school kid!" His face, contorted with anger, retained none of the handsome features that had first attracted her to him.

"We weren't doing anything!" she repeated for about the tenth time.

"Then what the hell were you doing?" he screamed back, little flecks of saliva spraying out from the corner of his mouth.

She tried to tell herself that he was just worried about her, that the reason he was so upset now was that she'd scared him and he was overcompensating. But the truth was he'd always been like this, it had just been hidden under veneer. He'd always wanted to control her life, to control her and the reason he'd always been pleasant about it in the past was because she'd never really challenged him before.

These last few days, she'd been feeling guilty about what she'd done, the Sux racing and everything that had followed it and most of all she'd been feeling bad about Brad, about putting him through it. Except he wasn't going through anything. She was. And wasn't he supposed to support her, not criticize her and make her feel worse than she already did?

Yes, he was. He was supposed to care about what she wanted. But he didn't. He only cared about what he wanted and because she happened to be part of that she had to fit in with his plans. She couldn't believe it had taken her so long to realize this, but then she'd been eighteen when they met, far too young to know what she planned to do with the rest of her life. She had a sudden flash of Danny's face, his light brown eyes filled with life and a hint of



mischievous and she knew that even when he'd been eighteen, Brad had never looked like that. He'd never been carefree, and after the last week carefree was exactly what she wanted.

"Well?" Brad was saying now. "Are you even listening to me, Kate?" His steely blue eyes glared into hers.

"I'm listening," she said. She sat back down on the sofa, suddenly tired of him.

She saw in his face that he didn't like how calm she was. "Well?" he said again.

She shrugged wearily. "What's the point, Brad? There was nothing going on between me and Danny, but you're not going to believe that and if I tell you what's really happening you won't believe that either, so why don't we just stop?"

That brought him up short. "Stop? Stop what?"

She leaned her head back against the cushions of the sofa so that she wouldn't have to look at his expression. "Stop everything. Stop pretending that our relationship is still working or that we're the same two people who fell in love five years ago."

She felt a thump as he collapsed into the sofa beside her. When she finally did look round at him, he looked distraught. She felt a surge of guilt—and tenderness. Brad wasn't a bad person. He did care about her. He just didn't care about her in the way she needed. "What are you saying?" His voice was tremulous. "Are you saying you want to finish between us?"

She took a deep breath then let it out again. It was strange, she'd thought about splitting up with Brad before, after some of their worst arguments, but she'd always imagined the break-up would be something she'd plan for a long time, agonize over for weeks. She hadn't expected it to be so spontaneous. "Yes," she told him. "I think that is what I'm saying."

His eyes filled with tears, but his instant reaction, was anger. "You fucking bitch! After the way I've looked after you this past week, all the shit I've put up with..."

She felt a surge of anger of her own, but tamped it down. He was only being like this because she'd hurt him. "You haven't done anything for me. All you've done is tell me to pull myself together."

He looked at her intently and he must have read something in her face she didn't realize was there. "Is that what this is about? Kate, you're not well. You're not thinking clearly. This isn't a time you should be making any big decisions, not while you're still suffering from these delusions..."

"They aren't delusions, Brad. I'm seeing death. I'm foreseeing it." He opened his mouth to protest but she held up her hand to stop him. "You're right, I did change a week ago, after I came back from death. The thing is, it's a permanent change, it isn't going to reverse. This is how I am now and if you can't live with it then it's better that we live apart." As she spoke them, she felt the truth of her words—and also her acceptance of them, of the change that had come over her.

But there wasn't any acceptance in Brad's face. The tears had gone, leaving only the anger. He stood up, knocking the coffee table over in a clatter of wood and china as he did. "Yeah, something did change, I can see that now! But it wasn't anything to do with those bullshit visions you were pretending to have. It was that guy, that guy that was here. You met him and then you couldn't get rid of me quick enough!"

Kate shook her head. "The only reason Danny was here was because he has the visions too. There's nothing going on between us. I just met him yesterday."

"Yeah, right!" Brad was pacing now like a caged animal. "How long have you been sleeping with him, Kate? Where did you meet him? I mean, he barely looks old enough to shave. Is he even legal?"

At that, Kate realized she'd had enough. She was about to walk out, leave him to fester alone, when it occurred to her that this was actually her apartment. She remembered what Danny had said about the place lacking a feminine touch, and almost smiled, but despite the fact that virtually every single piece of furniture and decoration in it had been chosen by Brad, it had been her own parents who had supplied the down-payment on it. So she instead stood up and said, "Get out."

Brad looked shocked. "Kate, for God's sake!" He folded his arms stubbornly.

But she went over and held open the door. "I mean it, Brad. I want you to leave. You can come back later and sleep on the sofa if you want and we can talk about how we're going to split our stuff, but right now I want to be alone."

He stared at her a moment. Whatever he saw seemed to convince him that she meant it, or at least that it wasn't worth arguing with her right now, because he grabbed his bag from beside the door, slung it over his shoulder and strode out of the apartment. He didn't look back once, even though he had to wait over a minute for the elevator.

Kate watched him all the time, the stiff angry line of his back. She only closed the door when the elevator doors had whooshed shut behind him. She expected to feel regret, maybe even to realize that she'd made a terrible mistake, but in the end all she felt was an enormous relief.

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Danny got back to the hotel just after Louise, as twilight was settling over the city, doing nothing to quell the unrelenting muggy heat. He took a bus, wondering when he'd ever feel confident enough to ride the subway again. Living in New York was going to be a real pisser if he didn't get over his new phobia.

In his head, he kept hearing again and again the message from the website he and Kate had found. "Once you're on, there's only one way off it. It's Death's Design." At the time, it had freaked him out big time, but now that a little while had passed he found it made him angry more than anything else. Why should he die just because some supernatural power or whatever had decided it was his time? All his life, he'd been getting himself in trouble then getting himself out of it again. He didn't intend to stop now. He felt more determined than ever to break the design—even if it was, quite literally, the last thing he did. Besides, the thought of watching his sister die—as he had in the vision of the train crash—was just too unbearable to contemplate. He held on to that determination as the bus drew to a stop on Fifth Avenue and he vaulted out and headed across and towards the hotel.

As soon as he was back, Louise told him about Jack Cohen's refusal to come to safety. He found himself getting angry because if they didn't know when Jack died then they wouldn't know when the next person was in the firing line. And he wasn't even sure who the next person was. His vision had been getting pretty vague by that point and he'd got kicked out of Kate's apartment before he'd had a chance to check with her.

Then he realized what he'd been thinking and felt terrible. If Jack Cohen died it would be more than just an inconvenience to him and the others. He looked round at them now. Bodil seemed to have pulled herself together after Peter's death. Her expression was grim but determined. Mary-Beth looked, if anything, worse, as if the reality of his death was really sinking in for her. James, on the other hand, seemed to have got over his earlier shock entirely, and Danny saw with a sinking heart that his square brown face was now wearing its customary expression of detached cynicism.

"So, find out anything new about our 'terrible fate?'" James asked, a mocking note in his voice.

Danny shrugged. "Only what we knew already. Death has a list, we're on it, and it's planning to work its way down till it's got us all."

"You do know this is ridiculous, don't you?" James said. "Two coincidences do not a proof make."

Louise glared at him. "Listen, asshole, it's not like we actually want to save your life. Personally, I'm hoping if Death does catch up with you it'll let me be in on the action. But the only way to stop death working its way down the list is to keep everyone on it safe. And unfortunately, that includes you."

James stood up. "You know what, I could sit here arguing with you, explaining the laws of probability and all kinds of other stuff that frankly I'd expect someone of your age to know already, but I simply can't be bothered. So tomorrow I'm going to go to the Cloisters, which I'd still quite like to see and then I'm going to enjoy the rest of my holiday here."

"Wait a minute, young man," Mary-Beth suddenly said, though her authority was undercut by the reediness of her voice, as if she was having to force it out through layers of resistance.

James turned back to her, one eyebrow raised.

"You're not going anywhere without my say-so and I say you stay in the hotel where we can all keep you safe."

James's mouth twisted and Danny could see him fighting with himself over whether to let the words out. But eventually his natural outspokenness won. "Or you'll do what?" he said. "Tell the organizers of the trip that I wouldn't listen to you when you insisted that death was out to get us?"

Mary-Beth leaned back as if she'd been slapped. Danny saw a flush of shame pass over James's face but it was too late to back down. "Anyway, it's been a horrible day and I'm going to bed," he said stiffly, then headed out of the room.

"Moron," Louise said.

"He's just afraid," Bodil said. "It's easier not to believe than to accept that we're going to die."

"We're not going to die," Danny said firmly. He looked round at the others and saw that they didn't really believe him.

"How are you going to stop it, honey?" MaryBeth asked. "There are some forces that are just plain more powerful than you or I."

"Maybe," Danny said. "But this isn't one of them. I've beaten it once and I can beat it again."

"How?" Louise asked. She didn't sound challenging, just curious.

And with the question, Danny finally came up with an idea. "We're going to go back to the hospital," he said. "Find out exactly what happened to Rinoka, all the details. Once we know that, we can start to get a picture of how this whole thing works. And once we know that, we can stop it."

Louise smiled. "Piece of cake."

But he could see from Bodil's and Mary-Beth's faces that they didn't agree.

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Tony was in a better mood. He was out of the hospital at last, and his wife had gone off for a spa break, leaving him free to enjoy the

company of his various mistresses without the risk of some screaming harpy showing up in the middle of it and ruining it all.

He was enjoying dinner at Ralph's restaurant with Tim and the boys, reporting in now that he was in better health and able to micro-manage the business the way he'd always preferred. When it was Tim's turn he started filling Tony in on the bitch who'd threatened him at the hospital. Tony frowned as he listened, not liking what he was hearing.

"I thought she was just some med student, Tony," Tim was saying. "She is a med student, so I didn't see how she could be connected."

"But?" Tony said impatiently. Tim drove him mad sometimes, always pussyfooting around everything as if he expected Tony to cut his throat if he ever said the slightest thing wrong. Of course, Tony had been known to off a man just for looking at him funny, but he'd never do it to Tim. He was too useful. And besides, he was too big—Tony doubted he could reach his throat to slit it.

"When I followed her home, she had company."

Tony slurped a particularly long string of spaghetti into his mouth, then licked the rich tomato sauce from his chin. "Company?"

"Yeah, company, like someone guarding her and I think he was packing heat."

"What did you do?" That was Big Ronny, who was a kike but good with numbers so they were prepared to overlook his ethnic origin. He was always fascinated by tales of Tim's extravagant violence. He leaned forward now, podgy face sticking out of his jowly neck like a tortoise that'd just had something sharp shoved up its ass.

"Nothing," Tim said. Ronny's face fell. "It was too public, Tony, you know. And I wanted to report back to you before doing anything... irrevocable."

"Maybe she's picked up a bodyguard cause she heard Tim was after her and was scared shitless," said Tony Two, picking at his teeth with a nicotine-stained nail.

Tim shrugged. "She didn't seem that scared to me. And she didn't seem to know who I was."

"So what you're saying, Tim, is that you in fact spent the last two days finding out fuck all!" Tony shouted, in one of the explosions of

anger for which he was famous. He thumped his hand down so hard on the table that sauce slopped out of his bowl onto the white tablecloth and diners at the other tables glanced round before realizing who it was and quickly turning back to their own business.

Tim hung his head, like a toddler who'd been caught raiding the cookie jar. "Tone, I'm sorry. But I know where she lives and I know where she works. Tomorrow, I can follow again, find out who it is she's working for, if you want."

"If I want? If I fucking want?" Tony's teeth pulled back from his lips in a snarl of rage. "Well, let's see. I'm lying in the hospital and some slut threatens to kill me and you wonder if I want to know who she's working for. Jesus fucking Christ, Tim—is there so much fat in your body now it's seeping into your brain?"

He realized that one of the waiters, a slim-faced boy barely out of high school, was hovering a few feet away, dishcloth slung over his arm.

"Can't you see we're fucking busy here?" Tony said to him.

The waiter smiled, apologetically. Then he lifted the dishcloth a fraction, so Tony could see the blunt muzzle of the handgun protruding out of it, and shot him straight between the eyes.

# NINE

The next day James was as good as his word. By the time Danny came down to breakfast, after an uneasy night's sleep plagued by dreams of the crash, he found that the British boy was already gone. Probably wanting to avoid another argument with them.

Just great, Danny thought. So both Jack and James were out of his sight and when what he knew was bound to happen to them happened he wouldn't be able to do a damn thing about it. He thought briefly about Kate, but quickly shoved thoughts of her quizzical, freckled face out of his mind. At least he knew she was safe. Death wasn't out to get her like the rest of them.

Louise looked at him curiously. Her sandy hair was sticking up from her head in wild spikes and he thought that she looked terribly young, like some ten year-old urchin. "Do you really think we'll find anything useful at the hospital?" she asked. "I mean, that'll be worth the risk of going outside? Wouldn't we just be safer to stick in here? You know, bed in, keep under cover, whatever."

Danny had been thinking it through and the more he thought about it the more he realized his impulse had been right. "We can't stay here forever. Eventually we'd have to leave, and then it would get us. Thing is, I've been thinking. When I saw the crash, there was a warning, a... a kind of signature. The guy listening to 'Crazy Train' on his stereo, that was what really clued me in. And then there was that book, *Murder on the Orient Express*. I'm guessing there was something similar, just before Rinoka and Peter died. There's always a warning. That's how I was able to avoid death the first time. That's how people are able to escape at all. So, if we go back to the hospital, figure out what Rinoka's warning was, maybe we'll be better prepared when Death comes round for us. We'll know how to spot the signs."

Louise seemed to accept this, because she went on eating her breakfast in silence, flicking through the pages of a magazine someone had left on the table as she ate. Reading over her shoulder, he saw the headline of the piece she was glancing through: "Killer



Looks and How to Get Them." His eyes homed in on the word killer, and he felt a shiver of fear, but he quickly dismissed it. Like James said, sometimes coincidences were just coincidences. And anyway, he was sure Louise had been one of the last to die in the crash, so she couldn't be next on the list.

When Mary-Beth and Bodil joined them, both looking dark-eyed and worn to the bone, he decided to head out right away. There was some debate about whether two of them should go and two of them should stay, but Danny reckoned they were safer sticking together, at least until they knew what the danger signs were.

On the street, though, he began to have a horrible feeling, as if he could sense the presence of death all around him. He remembered what Kate had said to him, that death cast its shadow backwards over the lives it would take. But that was ridiculous. They weren't going to die. And anything could seem sinister if you looked at it the wrong way.

Still, he found he couldn't help himself. Everyday objects, people, places took on a malevolent cast, a deepening shadow even in the blazing early morning sun. The old-fashioned umbrella store opposite the hotel, its wares hung up in serried ranks in the window, looked suddenly like an army of pikes, marching murderously towards the people on the street.

When the red light flashed at a junction, it felt like a warning of more than oncoming traffic. Daniel saw the color of blood in the sign and had a vivid flash of the bloom of it that had burst through Peter's chest where the gazelle's horn had impaled him. As he thought this, he glanced to one side and saw a young boy smiling at him. The boy lifted his hand to wave, still clutching the stuffed toy he'd been playing with. A toy gazelle.

It was just a gift from the zoo, Danny told himself, but he was beginning to feel like James, kidding himself. When, at the next junction, they passed a bathroom shop, the windows filled with huge enamel baths and he saw the red stop sign reflecting on the bottom of one, he became certain that it was more than a coincidence. The red stain of the light on the bath almost seemed to take on the shape of Rinoka's face.

He stopped in his tracks.

Behind him, the others all crowded round. Their faces were pale, probably reading the fear in his.

"What it?" Louise said. "Have you seen something?"

He didn't know how to explain, knew it would sound silly if he did. "It's just... I don't know, I'm getting a feeling, seeing things. I feel like something's sending me a warning."

"You think we should go back?" Bodil asked. She sounded as if this prospect scared her more than going on.

"I don't know," Danny said. "Maybe, maybe it is death trying to scare us off, because it doesn't want us to find out whatever's at the hospital."

"So you think we should go on?" Bodil's previously pretty face looked drawn and tight, as if she was expending so much energy just holding it together it was burning the flesh off her bones. It occurred to Danny for the first time that she might also be worried about James. The two of them had seemed to be getting friendlier, and now he'd disappeared off God knew where.

The others all stared at him, waiting for him to make up his mind. Since when did he get elected leader? he wondered, but he knew the answer. Ever since he'd saved them all from death; it was like some ancient Chinese or Japanese custom he'd read about somewhere. That if you saved someone's life, you had to look after it from then on. Which he'd always thought totally sucked. Because if you saved someone's life, shouldn't they owe you something? But now he was beginning to understand why it was the other way round. If you create something, or save something, it's only in the world because of you, so you have to take responsibility for it.

"We'll go on," he said eventually. "We're halfway there already and if something's going to happen it could just as easily happen on the way back."

He strode off before the others could question, or protest, his decision. He wasn't confident of it enough himself to defend it. But damn it, he didn't ask for this responsibility. He was just doing the best he could.

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The family was in shock. They hadn't even been able to bring down the shooter. He'd fled out the back of the restaurant as soon as he'd put the bullet in Tony and by the time Tim made it outside he was long lost in the bustle of sidewalk pedestrians, his waiter's apron abandoned behind him like a butterfly leaving its chrysalis.

Some fucking butterfly. Tim had been amazed to see Ronny bursting into tears as Tony's body slumped over the table, blood pouring out of the hole in his forehead to mingle with the tomato sauce on the tablecloth. He'd always known that Ronny respected Tony. He was the boss, after all. But Tim never realized that Ronny actually cared about him. Tim's feelings were nothing like that, just a cold burning rage that some bitch had put one over on him. And anger at Tony too, because if he had to die, why did he have to die on Tim's watch?

The others didn't say it, not yet, but Tim knew what they were thinking. Tim had had the person responsible for this in his sights and he'd let her go.

Well, that would all change. There was meeting now of the heads of the family, the lieutenants and made men who ran the day-to-day businesses. Out of instinct, Tim made to sit at the head of the great oak table, in his place beside Tony, before realizing that he'd never be taking that place again. He might not be taking any place at this table if he wasn't very, very careful.

Although there were people in the family, many of them probably, who were glad to see Tony go, who saw advancement in it for themselves, they couldn't let his death pass unavenged. And if they thought that Tim might in any way bear some responsibility for it... He had to find the real people responsible, and fast.

"Did anyone get a good look at the gunman?" Tony Two asked from the other end of the table, as the meeting gradually fell into silence.

"Yeah, but he couldda been anyone," Tim replied. "Wasn't who he was, was who he was working for we should be interested in."

"And who's that?" Mikey asked. He didn't know about the death threats. Tony had chosen not to tell him, afraid that his over-ambitious lieutenant might align himself with the assassins.

"We don't know, right Tim?" Ronny looked over at Tim, eyes narrowed, the edge in his voice unmistakable.

"No," Tim conceded, "but we got a lead. A girl, knew this was gonna happen."

"You had some warning about this?" Mikey asked. And now everyone around the table was glaring at Tim. He felt an uncomfortable itch between his shoulder blades, the kind you get when there's a gun sight trained on your back.

"What the fuck's going on here, Tim?" Freddy said.

Tim stood up, fearing that much longer at the table and he wouldn't get the chance to redeem himself. "That's what I'm gonna find out, Freddy. I got the address of the girl in question. By the time I'm through with her," he added grimly, "she'll be begging to tell me the size of the first dick she ever sucked."

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Danny brought them to the hospital without any mishap and he chose to tune out all the warning signs he saw in the casual glances of strangers, the sun flashing on their sunglasses, or the shadows on walls, which suddenly took on the shapes of skulls and knives.

But when he got inside, past the concrete forecourt and giant crane that loomed over it like a steel preying mantis, he realized that carrying out his plan wasn't going to be quite as simple as he'd thought. The trouble was, the hospital staff could think of only one reason why he'd be so interested in the details of Rinoka's death and that was that he intended to sue the asses off them.

As soon as she heard what he wanted, the receptionist sent out the senior administrator to meet them. He was a thin whiplash of a man, face frozen in an appeasing expression that it looked like he'd perfected twenty years ago and stuck with ever since.

He smiled broadly as he approached Danny, holding out his hand, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "John Stanmore. You're Danny

King, right?" His smile dropped, as if he realized it might not be appropriate in the circumstances. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Yeah," Danny said. He felt a fraud, since for all his worries about how Rinoka had died, he'd been far more concerned about what it meant for them than about Rinoka herself. He'd never considered her death a personal loss. "So, can you tell us a little more about what happened?" he asked John.

John's smile returned, looking more cautious. "Well, it's something we're still investigating ourselves."

"Listen to me, Mr Stanmore," Mary-Beth said unexpectedly, her voice firmer than before, as if she'd found renewed strength and purpose. "We don't want to sue you. We don't want any kind of... blood money... in exchange for that young girl's life. We just want to know exactly what it is that happened. And I think that the least you owe us is to tell us straight."

John looked into her calm, accusing eyes for a minute, then he turned without a word and led them to the nurse who'd been tending Rinoka before she died.

The nurse, who was introduced to them as Jess, was far less calm than John had been. "I'd checked on her, I'd only checked on her five minutes before," she said, when Mary-Beth explained what they wanted to know. "I was in such a hurry, I left a tray of my instruments behind and I was worried she might have hurt herself on them, but the doctors said it was nothing to do with that, that she was..." she looked at them and clearly decided to spare them the gory details. "She was just killed by that bath falling."

"But why did the bath fall?" Louise asked impatiently.

Jess shook her head. "I don't know, you'll have to ask Lien. She was looking after Andrew, that's the patient in the bath."

So they went and talked to Lien. If Jess had seemed distressed, Lien appeared eaten up with guilt, her eyes red from crying and her already squinched up face looking clenched with grief. "I'm so, so sorry," she kept saying, until eventually Mary-Beth grabbed her and said sternly, "It isn't your fault. Mr Stanmore told us you were treating another patient who was seriously ill. You were just doing your job. All we're asking is to know what happened."

But Lien didn't have much more to tell them. She'd left her patient, Andrew Williams, in the bath and then she'd got distracted and even though he'd been awake when she'd left him he must have nodded off because the next thing she knew he was plunging down onto the floor below. "But I guess the person to ask would be Andrew," she finished.

"He's still alive?" Danny asked, astonished.

"Oh yes," Lien said. "The fall didn't kill him. But the whole thing shook him up pretty bad. Actually, I don't know that you had better speak to him. He's... well, he's not got long to go."

"That's okay," Danny said, dispiritedly. He could see the same disappointment in the others' faces. They hadn't learnt anything useful here at all. The most he could figure out was that Rinoka, like Peter, had been killed by a bizarre string of coincidences, a sequence of events which were individually innocent but together contrived to put her in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. The trouble with that was that you'd never know what the string of events had been until it was too late—like letters that are meaningless until they come together to form a word. It seemed like the whole trip might have been a waste of time after all.

"Is that all you needed to know?"

Danny exchanged looks with the others, but they were all looking as blank as him. He suspected the problem was that he was asking the wrong questions. He was, he realized, asking ordinary questions, but it was the extraordinary he needed to know about. "No," he said. "There's something else. This is gonna sound a bit weird, but did you, did you get any kind of bad feeling before it happened? Almost like you could sense it coming?"

She cocked her head to one side, taking his question seriously. "No, not really. No, actually, there was one thing. It's probably nothing."

Danny nodded at her to continue.

"Well, just before it happened, I suddenly felt really cold. You know, as if someone had opened a window somewhere nearby. Only none of the windows on this floor open, and the temperature's regulated."

As soon as she said it, Danny remembered the gust of wind that had blown through the zoo just before Peter's death. And he realized that the cold he'd felt on the subway the day of the accident might not have been entirely due to the overactive air conditioning.

He smiled at Lien. "Thanks. That is helpful."

Once they were away from Lien, the others turned to him. "Well?" Louise demanded. "What was so useful about that?"

"I think what she said about the cold wind is important," he said. "I think that happens every time, just before death hits." Danny didn't know why he felt so certain, but he was sure that he was right. He strode confidently towards the bank of elevators, pulling the others in his wake.

"A cold wind?" Louise sounded dubious. "Isn't that a bit, I don't know, low-key for the grim reaper?"

"But that's just it, isn't it?" Danny said, grabbing her arm in his enthusiasm as they waited for the elevator. "It's not like Death actually turns up with a scythe and takes people away. It uses stuff that's in the world already to do the work. Just gives it a... a kind of nudge."

"And that's what the wind is, the effect of death 'nudging the world?" Mary-Beth asked.

"Yeah in a way, I guess. Or like, I don't know, the world drawing its breath, waiting for something real bad to happen."

The elevator doors slid open in front of him, but for a moment he caught a clear glimpse of Louise's reflection beside him. She was giving him a long considering look, the kind she'd always used when they were kids and he was trying to bullshit her out of the last slice of pie or the best seat on the bus. Then she shrugged. "Makes about as much sense as anything else has these last few days."

Bodil curled her arms around herself in a fetal, defensive gesture. "So you're saying, what, we should be careful of strong winds? Of getting cold?"

Danny pressed the button for the first floor. "I'm saying if you ever find yourself feeling cold for no reason, or feel a breeze where there shouldn't be any, it's time to start being very, very careful. And what you should be most careful of are the things that seem the most

harmless. Because that seems to be how death does it. Using everyday things against us..."

He trailed off as he noticed the indicator lights on the lift. They'd reached the first floor, but the doors seemed to be stuck shut. His heart lurched, and he found himself searching hurriedly round the small compartment, frantically looking for the small, unconsidered thing that would kill them all.

The others caught his look and his fear. "What is it?" Bodil asked, her own voice choked with panic. She took a step back from him to press herself against the mirrored wall of the elevator, as if that might somehow protect her.

"It's—" Danny said, but then the lift gave a lurch and jolted downward, to stop a second later as the indicator flashed B. He calmed himself with an effort. At least there was no feeling of cold here. In fact, the elevator felt stiflingly hot, as if outside, the same fire that had helped to finish off Peter might surround it. With an effort, he quelled that thought too. "It's probably nothing," he said, though his throat was so dry that his voice came out as a croak. "I must have just pressed the wrong button."

And then the doors slid open in front of him.

Framed in the doors, standing in the corridor as if he'd been waiting for them, was a vast African-American man. His head was nearly bald, reflecting back the dim bare bulbs in the concrete ceiling. Beneath the dome of his forehead, his face lay in shadow, but Danny thought it was wearing an expression that was halfway between mockery and pity.

"Have you come to see the body?" he asked, in a rich, dark voice. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Danny saw that the man was wearing a white coat and carrying some kind of gleaming silver medical instrument. He must be the mortician, Danny guessed.

The mortician stepped away from the elevator, but despite the fact that the entrance was now clear, no one inside made a move to leave it. "Not afraid of me, are you?" he asked. His expression was now definitely mocking.

Taking it as a challenge, Danny finally stepped out of the elevator, reluctantly trailed by the other three. "Whose body?" Danny asked,



looking up into the mortician's shadowed eyes.

"Young Rinoka's, of course," the mortician said. Danny felt a chill of fear. How did he know? But the whole atmosphere down here was dreamlike, nightmarish, so that it seemed somehow possible that the mortician would know precisely who they were and what they wanted. It felt, Danny realized, similar to the atmosphere in the ghost train when he'd received the vision that had started it all. And that gave him some hope. Maybe there'd be some help for them here, too.

"Yeah, we'd like to see Rinoka's body," Danny said. He heard a shocked gasp from the others behind him.

"Danno?" Louise hissed. "What the hell are you playing at?"

He shrugged. "We came here to understand, didn't we? Well, maybe seeing Rinoka's... Maybe seeing her will help."

The mortician grinned at that, his smooth face suddenly full of sharp, angular planes. "That's right, Danny, you do need to understand." And before Danny could question how he knew his name, he turned on his heel and strode away down the gloomy corridor. "Though you may not recognize what you see," he called back over his shoulder. "Rinoka came to a very... sticky... end." He chuckled darkly to himself, the laughter echoing back down the corridor towards them.

After a second, Danny went after him, having to virtually jog to keep up with the mortician's lengthy stride. He felt the others following him, and Bodil came up and grabbed his elbow. "What are you doing?" she demanded. He could see white lines of stress around her mouth. "Who is this man? How does he know who you are?"

"I don't know," Danny told her, trying to sound as reassuring as possible, because the Danish girl looked on the point of losing it big time. "But I think we need to listen to what he has to tell us."

"But I don't want to see Rinoka's... I don't want to see Rinoka. It's morbid." Bodil's voice was scratchy and tight.

"Then don't come in," Louise said impatiently as they finally reached the single room at the end of the hallway. The mortician pushed open the door with casual strength. It creaked as if swinging on hinges that hadn't been oiled this century and a wave of cold air

carrying the scent of disinfectant and decay washed out to meet them.

Despite his words, Danny hesitated a second in the doorway, suddenly not so sure that he did want to see what was left of Rinoka. But she was dead. They were still alive—and if examining her body could help them stay that way then he had to do it.

But he still wasn't prepared for what he saw inside the room. It took him a moment to realize that the thing on the table was the young woman he'd hung out with for two days and when he did, he had to turn away and gag. He caught a glimpse of Louise's pale face staring fixedly at the corpse and Mary-Beth's eyes glazed and blank, as if she was slipping away from reality to avoid acknowledging what was in front of her.

Rinoka had been utterly destroyed. Her corpse looked like the kind of thing that butchers hung up outside their stores in old-fashioned films, a little gutted rabbit of a body. Her chest had been entirely caved in, the internal organs gone, leaving a gaping hole and the shattered white struts of her rib cage. Her face was just... gone. What remained was like some horrible pancake of flesh and half-decayed tissue. Perhaps most horribly of all, her arms and the bottom half of her legs had remained virtually unscathed. They stuck out round the remains of the rest of her like some brutal practical joke. He was surprised to see a tiny tattoo of a bluebird on her wrist. He'd never noticed it when she was alive.

It was Bodil who recovered first. She stepped up a little closer—and then, to Danny's astonishment, she reached out and gently touched one of the outflung hands. "Poor Rinoka," she said.

"Look at it this way," the mortician said. "Thanks to Danny here she had five more hours of life than she was ever meant to."

Danny looked up into his bottomless black eyes and felt for a moment as if he was falling into them. "How do you know... how do you know about any of it?"

The mortician smiled, teeth flashing whitely. He leaned down and, with a precise scalpel movement, sliced the flesh of her wrist where her tattoo had been. He placed the severed flesh delicately into a glass dish. "I'm very intimate with death."

Danny swallowed. "Good. Because we came here to find out if there's anything, anything about how Rinoka died that can help us. Do you know what happened to her?"

The mortician shook his head. "You've only been here five minutes and already you're asking the wrong questions."

"Then what should we be asking?" Danny said.

"There's nothing in this girl's death that can help you." The mortician's voice seemed to fill the air as completely as his body filled the room. "But maybe death itself can."

"What the hell does that mean?" Bodil shouted suddenly. "Stop this bullshit and just tell us!" She moved aggressively towards him, her earlier fear seeming to have transmuted into anger. Reckless anger. The mortician looked as if he could flatten her with one finger.

But the mortician just laughed. "Such energy. Such life. What a shame to see it," he reached out with his scalpel and casually severed one of the strings of flesh stretching across Rinoka's hollow chest "—cut off."

"Listen to me, young man," Mary-Beth said, and Danny almost smiled to hear her addressing the hulking figure in front of her that way, "either offer us some assistance or tell us to leave, but don't you dare play games with us. Not after what we've been through."

"No games," the mortician said, his smile now almost a grimace. "I can speak but if you don't listen then who's to blame? You're on Death's List; you know this. You broke Death's Design and Death will do anything to mend it."

He sat down, perched on the edge of the thick mortuary slab like a relaxed professor lecturing his students. "The river of time flows in only one direction, forward. You took a step outside it and for that you're due to pay a high price. But they say you can never step in the same river twice. That the second time you'll be a different person. You can't meet death twice, either. Facing it once—really facing it, not just looking in its eye and turning aside, as you've done—makes you into a different person, maybe not the person that Death wants anymore. Death wants to slot you back into his design, his jigsaw, but if you've become a different piece then you will no longer fit."

Danny tried to absorb this, to keep up with the flow of ideas. He had a sense that he might understand what the mortician was getting at, but when he opened his mouth to ask the mortician held up his hand.

"No more questions. No more time," he said, his face suddenly somber. Then he grinned again, a vast feral white smile. "Besides, I don't think you want to stay for what comes next." He reached out to a table beside him and picked up a huge gleaming silver implement, like a cross between an apple corer and a surgical blade.

Danny turned and left before he could see what the mortician was going to do to Rinoka's body with it.

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They didn't say anything in the elevator back up, which this time actually did take them to the lobby on the first floor. Then, as the doors opened, Louise turned to Danny.

"Well, you sure know how to find them," she said. "Are you some kind of freako magnet or something?"

Bodil laughed a high thin sound that didn't have much to do with amusement—but Louise's words seemed to have loosened the tension that had been holding them all immobile.

"Did he say anything useful?" Mary-Beth asked Danny. "Did you understand what he meant?"

Danny shook his head, his sneakers squeaking on the marble floor as they strode across the lobby towards the entrance. "I don't know. I feel like maybe he did, but I can't figure out what it is yet."

"Well," Bodil said dryly, "do you think you might work it out before it's one of our bodies he's pulling apart?"

Danny didn't think that one needed a reply. He noticed, though, that no one had asked who the mortician was. He didn't think anyone wanted to know.

When they emerged from the hospital, he was surprised to find the day overcast and gloomy. It didn't seem possible for the weather to have changed so much so quickly. The clouds hung low and gloomy over the New York skyline, heavy with unspent rain. There was a

definite chill in the air as if, despite the fact that it was the fifteenth of August, a switch had been flipped somewhere and the season had flicked over to fall.

Danny was still looking up at the sky when he heard a voice he recognized. "Are you okay? Has someone been hurt?"

It was Kate. Her face looked gray-white under the darkening sky, drawn down with lines of concern, and her strawberry blonde hair was flying wildly in the growing wind, but Danny sensed beneath that that she was happier than he'd yet seen her. She seemed to be bursting with a newly released energy.

"We're fine," he told her. "No one's hurt, we just came here to find out some stuff. But why are you here? I thought you were on suspension."

"I am." She looked at him for a moment, as if not sure whether to carry on. Then she added, "I'm here to drop off the last of Brad's stuff and collect my keys."

He saw that she had a small carryall slung over her shoulder. It took a moment for the import of her words to sink in. When they did, he smiled. "Have you and him...?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

His grin widened. Then he controlled it. "I'm, you know, sorry things didn't work out with you two."

She smiled back at him. "No you're not."

"No, I'm not." He moved a little nearer to her. He was quite sure that her splitting up with Brad had nothing to do with him. That she was no more likely to consider him a likely prospect than she had yesterday when she'd made it very clear she considered him too young. But at least now there was no competition. He was about to ask her whether she wanted to come back to the hotel when another voice shouted out across the growing roar of the wind.

"Jesus. What the hell are you doing here?"

It was James. He was limping across the forecourt of the hospital towards them, an annoyed frown creasing his face.

"What are you doing here?" Bodil asked. "I thought you were going to the Cloisters."

James scowled. "I was. But I twisted my bloody ankle on the way down into the subway. I thought it was okay but then it really started to ache so I thought I'd better come and get it checked out."

"This isn't the nearest hospital to the museum," Danny said suspiciously. Somewhere in the pit of his stomach he was beginning to get a cold, queasy feeling.

A momentary expression of doubt crossed James's face, as if he wasn't quite sure why he'd come here either. Danny felt his nebulous unease begin to harden into certainty. Then James shrugged. "I knew how to find this place. Plus they've already taken my insurance details. And it's not like it was life-threatening. What does it matter, anyway?"

Danny somehow knew that it did matter, very much, though he couldn't have said why. The wind was howling fiercely around them now, flapping their clothes against their skin and snatching the words out of their mouths the moment they were spoken.

"Anyway, what are you doing here?" James asked. "I thought you were going to stay safely holed up at the hotel for the rest of the week. Or possibly forever."

"No," Louise said with forced patience, "the plan was to try to figure out what was going on so that we could do something about stopping it. You know, so we could maybe save our lives."

"We came to ask about Rinoka," Mary-Beth said with more genuine patience. "See if there was anything about her death that could offer assistance to us, help us to avoid the same fate." Her arms were wrapped around her in a vain attempt to keep her blouse from being lifted by the wind, and Danny saw that she was shivering. It was suddenly very cold. No longer even fall; the season seemed to have descended all the way to winter.

The dread consuming Danny was so severe now that he could feel it rising in his throat, choking him. He wanted to shout out a warning, but he didn't know what to warn them about. If there was a threat, and he was sure there was, he had no idea where it was coming from. If he tried to warn people, he might just end up sending them straight to it.

Before he could recover from his paralysis, the rain started falling down. Great, heavy sheets of it more like a tropical rainstorm than anything you normally saw in the New York area. He lost sight of Bodil, standing only ten feet away talking to James, and Louise at his side was reduced to a wavering pink-blue form. The rain lashed against his skin, as harsh and heavy as flint. He felt as if it this astonishing onslaught must be marking him in some way and didn't want to look down at his own skin in case he saw it pouring with blood.

The rain was so heavy that he almost didn't see the final figure that approached their group, just a gray blur as it headed past them and towards the hospital doorway. But something about its hunched form, the brighter silver in the area that might have been its head, looked strangely familiar. With the primitive, unspoken instinct that recognizes form and movement before it knows faces, Danny was certain that he'd seen this person before. Futilely, he tried to dash the water from his eyes and face to make the view clearer, but more simply sluiced down from his hair, obscuring his vision even further.

In an instant, the figure passed to the left of him. He caught a glimpse of a hawk-like nose cutting through the rain like the prow of some Viking ship, and suddenly he knew it. It was Jack Cohen, the old man he'd rescued from death on the train. An instant later, he knew exactly what this meant. Every single person who should have died on the train and didn't was in this one place. By the most improbable coincidence, they were all standing within five feet of each other. And he knew with absolute certainty, the thing he was dreading was going to happen right now.

"Run!" he screamed at the top of his voice. The rain seemed to deaden the sound, swallowing it whole. He thought perhaps that the figures around him had turned their heads towards him, but he couldn't be sure. It was even darker now. It seemed that the sun must have disappeared from the sky entirely. Maybe there'd been an eclipse, an unanticipated one localized only over Manhattan.

He was already flinging himself bodily at the others, pushing them apart to scatter them as widely as possible, when he realized the

other possible explanation. That perhaps something very big, and very heavy, was falling straight towards them.

He flailed his arms into Mary-Beth and Jack, shoving them so hard that he saw them both go down and he didn't feel guilty about it, just hoped that he'd got them far enough away. Somewhere, in the background, he saw two pink blurs backing away. He thought it must be James and Bodil and that they had seen what he'd seen and were making their own getaway but he didn't have any more time to worry about them. And then all he could see was his own sister as he headed towards her faster than he'd ever run, so fast that the oxygen burned in his lungs and the muscles of his legs bunched and knotted in pain.

He hit Louise full on, knocking her backwards with an indignant yelp he could hear even above the roar of the storm. She stumbled to her knees, and for a moment he thought about running on past her, but then he stopped and hauled her to her feet because if she was going to die he didn't want to survive either.

Then the thing hit the ground. He felt its impact jolt the earth and stab up through his legs, loosening their hold on the ground so that he fell to his knees beside his sister. He clapped his hands over his ears, but nothing could keep the overwhelming sound of the impact out, vibrating every bone in his body so that he was afraid it would shake them entirely apart, and though whatever it was had missed him it would kill him nonetheless. It was an astonishing amalgam of sound, the sound of glass shattering and metal shearing and wood splintering and concrete cracking. It was a sound of total destruction.

But it wasn't the sound of flesh tearing, or bones cracking or human beings screaming. Astonishingly, it had missed them all. From her crouch on the ground, Louise looked into his eyes and after a moment she started laughing. She threw her head back and let out a great bellow in a gesture as carefree as a five year-old.

"Fuck," Danny said. "Fuck."

Then, after a moment more to make sure that that really was the end, not the thing that would drive them to the end, he wobbled to his feet.



The sun chose the same moment to emerge, the clouds dissipating as quickly as they'd formed. The rain continued as a light, inoffensive trickle, and the sudden clear blue of the sky was written across with a broad rainbow, as perfect as any Danny had ever seen. He saw that Kate was standing only a few feet away from him, staring at the fallen box in wonder. Her curly hair had been plastered to her head by the rain, looking like a sodden red-brown cap, her face bigger and more intense beneath it. And very, very beautiful.

She looked over at him and he grinned back.

"What the hell was that?" Louise said. She'd also staggered to her feet, and was looking at the mashed pile of debris beside them with something like awe. Now that it had landed, Danny could see that it wasn't very big, maybe ten, fifteen feet square, just large enough, in fact, to have squashed every one of them.

"I think it might have been the hospital's new MRI scanner," Kate said dubiously. She looked up and nodded. "Yeah, it's so heavy they have to deliver it by crane. It was supposed to be going to the third floor."

Danny looked up and could indeed see the spindly tower of the crane hovering above them, broken-off cording hanging from its single arm. In its cabin he could just make out the shape of a man, his face white with shock, the mouth visible in his face only as a big shocked "O."

Now that the initial shock was over he remembered bowling poor Mary-Beth and Jack Cohen over in the heat of the action. He glanced around and saw that Jack was helping Mary-Beth to her feet. She moved stiffly, but not as if anything was broken. Neither of them was looking at each other. They were all looking at the wreckage of the scanner.

"So, was it very valuable?" Danny asked Kate.

She eyed the shattered metal and glass as if the truth of it hadn't quite sunk in. "I don't know, several million I guess."

Danny smiled at her, then at the others as they gradually gathered round, still light-headed with relief. "Then I guess we'd better get the fuck out of here before they decide it was our fault."

# TEN

They went to a little diner that Kate suggested a couple of blocks from the hospital. By that time Danny was beginning to come down off the adrenaline high. He felt worn out, like a tape that had been played once too often. The others were all still buzzing, even James.

Bodil seemed to sense Danny's mood. She glanced at him over the top of her mochaccino. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," he said. "Just still shaken up, I guess."

She looked at him sympathetically. "Another vision."

He shook his head. "It wasn't a vision this time. I just... knew."

"A sixth sense?" she suggested. James gave her a sour look, then returned to devouring his teetering stack of pancakes.

Danny shook his head again. "It wasn't a gut thing. It was a head thing. We were all there, every single one of us who got off that train. And we hadn't planned to be there, it was all this massive coincidence."

"Plus it got really cold suddenly," Louise said, "did you notice?"

"Yes, it got very cold because an enormous storm suddenly hit us," James said in his most disparaging voice. The effect was ruined slightly by the fact that a big slice of pancake was hanging out of the corner of his mouth as he spoke, dribbling maple syrup down his chin.

"But why did a storm hit us, honey?" Mary-Beth asked. Even she seemed to have been affected by the mood of almost hysterical happiness that had followed their near-death experience. "If you rationalize everything away like that you'll be left with nothing but your own mind that you believe in."

"That is all I believe in," James said stubbornly. But then he looked at Danny and grinned. "Still, you saved our lives. Again. I suppose I ought to thank you."

"I've just realized something," Bodil said, suddenly sounding serious.

"Yeah?" Louise looked at her, not liking the tone of her voice, not wanting anything to spoil the moment.

"We just looked death in the eye, right?" She looked round at each of them, her blue eyes sparkling as they hadn't since Rinoka's death two days ago.

"Well, yeah, I guess," Louise conceded.

. Danny could see where she was going with this, but he wasn't sure she was right. "You're saying we've done what that mortician guy said."

Bodil nodded, and when Mary-Beth realized what that meant her expression lit up too. Beside her, Jack looked puzzled. "Anyone care to explain to a poor old man what in hell you're talking about?"

Louise she smiled affectionately at the old man. Danny realized with surprise that she liked him, and felt a small and irrational twinge of jealousy. In his life, he'd never really thought of Louise liking anyone but him. She had friends, but they were just people to hang with or take advantage of. No one she was really close to, not in the way the two of them were close. He wondered what it was that she saw in the old Jewish guy.

"Yeah, what do you mean?" Kate asked, and as soon as she spoke Danny stopped paying any attention to Louise at all.

"It's something someone said to us," he explained. "That if we faced death and survived, we'd be so changed by it that death wouldn't want us anymore." He realized that one of the waiters was looking over at him as he spoke and lowered his voice self-consciously.

"Kind of like me, you mean," Kate said. "The way I was changed by it." She didn't sound very comfortable with the idea.

Danny's heart sped up, the beginnings of an idea forming, but then Bodil spoke and it slipped away. "Not exactly the same, I don't think, because Death wasn't out to get you, was it? In fact, with you it was the opposite. You weren't supposed to die, but you did anyway—upsetting death's plan in the other direction."

"Yeah, I guess that's true," Kate said. She sounded surprised, as if she'd never quite thought of it that way before. At the other end of the table, James had his head in his hands, his fingers curled into his short wiry hair, as if he couldn't bear to hear any more of this crap.

Danny saw, though, that one brown eye was peeking out between his fingers, still fixed on Bodil.

"But we were supposed to die," Bodil continued, "and we didn't. I think what the man meant was that if death tried again, and nearly succeeded, but we survived, then we'd be safe-changed, like he said. Death would leave us alone after that."

Danny scrunched his mouth up. He didn't want to rain on anyone's parade. He didn't want to rain on his own, but he couldn't help feeling that this wasn't quite right. "Yeah, but what about Rinoka? After the crash, when we were running away, that piece of metal from the train nearly killed her. If I hadn't seen it and knocked her out of the way then it would have. She survived that, and death still came back and got her later."

Louise shook her head. "Jesus, Danny, look on the bright side much? That was all part of the same thing, you know, the original attack. What happened just now was different."

"I think she's right," Mary-Beth said. "I feel, I don't know how to explain it, but I feel free. Like some dark cloud's cleared and the sun's shining through again."

"I don't know," Danny said. "I just don't want us getting overconfident. We shouldn't let our guard down."

"Yeah," Louise said, shaking her head at him. "I mean, we wouldn't want us actually enjoying ourselves or having a good time or ever being happy again or anything. Let's spend the rest of our lives worrying about when we're going to die and then when we drop dead of a heart attack at the age of eighty we'll be able to say—there you go, I knew it was gonna happen eventually. No offense, Mr Cohen."

Jack Cohen laughed, a dusty chuckle that sounded as if it might have hurt his throat. "I say the young lady's right. You've got to live before you die. And I should know. I could meet the reaper any day now and you don't see me looking over my shoulder the whole time. What would be the point?"

"I know," Mary-Beth said, smiling at Jack, "why don't we celebrate? We could go for a picnic in Central Park."

Jack smiled back at her. "Great, I know a deli on east sixty-second that'll do us some great pastrami on rye. And there's a liquor store

nearby for the wine."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Mary-Beth said doubtfully, looking round at Danny and the others with a small frown. Her face fell slightly and it seemed to him that she was remembering the ill-fated expedition on their first night here. The expedition that had, in its way, started this whole thing.

"Come on now," Jack coaxed. "We'll be there to keep an eye on them. You can't have a celebration without booze. I thought you goyim would know that for sure."

"But isn't drinking in public places banned?" Mary-Beth persisted, though she sounded far less sure of herself.

Jack grinned. It pulled his wrinkled cheeks tightly back from his hawk nose, and made him look suddenly rakish, almost piratical. It occurred to Danny that Jack probably used to be worse than any of them when he was their age, sometime back at the dawn of the last century. "So... live a little!" Jack said.

Danny was glad to see them looking so happy. For the first time he felt an easing of that terrible sense of responsibility he'd carried around with him since the train crash. But it all seemed too simple. It didn't seem right that Death—so implacable up till now—would let them off the hook so easily.

Kate saw the look on his face and reached across the table to gently touch his hand. "Hey, where's the harm? Central Park's about as safe as you can get these days, and at least you can see any danger coming. You'll probably be better off there than back at the hotel."

"Look at it this way," James said to him. "If you are going to die, do you want to spend your last few hours sitting in one of the most beautiful parks in the world enjoying a perfect summer's day, or cooped up in a damp room in a frankly rather substandard midtown hotel?" Although he remained looking at Danny, Danny saw his eyes flick to Bodil as he spoke and he suspected that she was the main reason a picnic seemed like an attractive idea to the British boy.

"Hey, I thought you didn't believe any of that shit," Louise challenged.

James shrugged. "I don't. But if it is true, then you have to follow the logic of my arguments. And anyway, I'm bored of wandering

around New York on my own."

"Well, I don't have anything to do this afternoon," Kate said. "I wouldn't mind joining you if you're okay with that?"

After that, Danny didn't bother arguing with them any more.

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In the park, James asked Bodil if she wanted to go for a walk to see the chess players outside the gazebo near the southern end. She wasn't that interested, but she wanted to hang around with James and didn't want to hang around with Mary-Beth and the old man and Danny was clearly focused entirely on getting inside the doctor girl's pants, so she agreed to tag along.

She studied James out of the corner of her eye as he watched the chess players playing. He was undoubtedly good-looking. The coffee color of his skin was smooth and rich, and his face was pleasingly square and masculine. But he was so uptight; no one in their right mind would call him sexy.

That, of course, was exactly what appealed to her. When she'd been fourteen, all the other girls had gone after the older boys, saying they were more sophisticated, more mature, not like those idiots they went to school with. But Bodil had always preferred her fellow fourteen year-olds. She liked their fumbling and insecurity. It was kind of charming. Also, they were always so grateful that a girl was letting them touch her. It meant the power in the relationship was with her—exactly where she liked it.

James had seemed pretty damn grateful when she'd started going down on him in the zoo. As for the power, well, there he wasn't so easy to control. It was infuriating about him, his stubbornness, but also, she had to admit, kind of appealing. None of her other boyfriends had ever stood up to her, and while she wanted to punch James half the time she was getting a lot less bored of him than she usually did of the boys she dated.

James seemed to feel her eyes on him and looked round. He blushed slightly, a brush of cherry on his brown cheeks. "Sorry, I know it's geeky but I just think it's so great that they'd do this in the

middle of their main park. In London, Hyde Park's famous for Speaker's Corner, where any lunatic can stand up and say whatever they want about anybody." He thought about that for a moment. "I suppose that says it all, really."

She looked at him for a long moment, her head cocked to one side. "Have you ever had sex?" she asked.

The cherry blush deepened to a port burgundy. "Erm..."

"So, why are you talking to me rather than having it?" She turned and began to walk away into the gloom of the surrounding woods. Her footsteps crunched on the dry earth, but after a moment she realized that hers were the only ones she could hear. She turned round. James was still standing back where she'd left him, his arms folded over his chest. After a moment, she trotted back to him.

"You're very sure of yourself," he said once she was back in earshot. "How do you know I want to have sex with you?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, irked. "It could be the way you let me put your cock in my mouth yesterday."

"You didn't actually ask before you did that," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but I didn't see you complaining!" she snapped back, then realized that in fact he had. She felt the first, unaccustomed hint of uncertainty. Had she been misreading him all along? Maybe he just liked her, but wasn't really interested in anything else. She was surprised to find how disappointed that made her feel.

"Come on," James said, acting now as if the previous conversation hadn't taken place. "There's a boating lake further up according to the map."

He walked off without turning round to see if she would follow. After a moment she did, feeling a mixture of anger and interest that she hadn't felt before.

As James walked ahead of her, he was mentally kicking himself. What was he thinking? He'd just been offered sex on a plate, the—yes—first sex of his life and for some mad reason he'd turned it down.

But he knew with very clear insight that if he'd acceded to Bodil's request that would have been the first and last time he ever slept with her. So he was, he realized, playing hard to get. He smiled as he heard Bodil's footsteps pattering to catch up with him.

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Danny sat under a tree beside Kate, a little aside from where Louise, Mary-Beth and Jack were finishing off the picnic on a ratty old tartan rug that Jack had stopped at his home to pick up. He'd expected to have a struggle to get rid of his sister so he could have some time alone with Kate, but she'd surprised him by volunteering to stay with the old folks. He couldn't believe that she was doing it for his sake—no one changed that much that quickly—so he could only assume that she actually wanted to spend time with the others.

Not that he was complaining. After watching Kate eating a banana from the picnic, his mind had been filled with the kind of fantasies that wouldn't get shown on network television. He turned to look at Kate and found her eyes already on him, half-veiled under her eyelids.

"Tell me about Brad," he said.

She started, as if that was the last thing she'd expected him to say. "Why?"

He looked down, embarrassed, then looked up again. "You went out with him for five years, so he must have been this huge part of your life. He's part of who you are, right? And I want to know all of that."

Kate thought it over for a minute, then laughed. "The stupid thing is, he's not part of who I am. I think we'd been... drifting apart is a real cliché, but kind of growing in different directions for a long time. Only I hadn't noticed because it's always easier to stay in a relationship than leave it."

"But you loved him?" Danny didn't really want to hear the answer to that.

"Yeah, of course," she said, and Danny's heart sank. "He loved me, too. But that counts for shit, in the end."

"So, all right," Danny said, "tell me something else interesting about you, about your past. Something you've never told anyone else." He worried for a moment that that was a really childish thing



to say, the kind of thing you asked your prom date, but she smiled at him.

"Okay," she said after a moment. "I was six." He was a little disappointed. He'd been hoping for something juicier. But he settled back on his elbows to listen, squinting against the sunlight that dappled down on him through the tree.

"I was playing with my best friend, Tom. Haven't seen him in ten years but he was the whole world to me then. We were digging in a sandpit, you know, the way you do, trying to dig the biggest possible hole that we could. And after a while there started being all these tiny threads poking in through the side of the hole. I mean they were roots, obviously, but I didn't know that. And Tom, who was a freaky little kid now I think about it, told me that they were God's hairs."

Her eyes were distant, washed out to the color of dry summer grass as she lost herself in the past. The excited shouts of kids playing baseball drifted over on the wind. "And you know, I totally believed him. For a while, my whole view of the world... changed. It was like I'd had this mental image of it and I had to totally revise it. It scared the shit out of me, actually, the idea that every day I was walking around only a couple of feet above God's head. It wasn't until a week later when mom and dad found out what Tom had told me and put me right that I stopped having nightmares." The color of her eyes deepened to emerald as she seemed to return to herself. She shrugged, suddenly looking embarrassed. "Sorry, it's a stupid story."

"No it's not," Danny said. "It's a great story."

"So what about you?" she asked, sitting forward to look intently at him. She was so close he could feel the faint wind of her breath on his face, and he realized with shame that he was starting to get a hard-on with her so near him. He shifted subtly, moving his arm to cover it.

"What about me?"

"Well, why you?"

"Why me what?"

She pointed at him. "Why did you get the big vision? Anyone on that train could have seen what was going to happen, but only you did. Why?"

"I don't know," Danny said. "Just dumb luck I guess. Or bad luck."

Kate shook her head. "You know what, I don't think it's as simple as that."

Danny was going to brush her off again, but it occurred to him that she might be right, maybe there was some particular reason that he'd been chosen and if there was then he ought to figure it out because it might still be the key to saving them all.

"I think I know what it is," Kate said. She leaned back to study him and though she was only a foot or so further away he felt her absence keenly. "It's a... connection, isn't it? I've got a connection to death, so I can see what death's intending. And I think you've got a connection to life, so you can see it ending—but unlike me you get to stop it."

Danny frowned, puzzled. "But we've all got a connection to life. I mean, haven't we?"

"Not as strong as yours. Lots of people... they just drift along, counting the days off like a duty. I know because I've been one of them. But I don't get that impression about you. You seem to really live, to really be alive. That's something to do with being young, but it's more than that. Your sister's got it too, only with her there's a recklessness to it that's got something to do with death, too. Yours is purer."

Danny would have felt embarrassed to have someone talk about him in this way, which let's face it was pretty fucking sappy, except that it was Kate and implied that she might actually like him so the embarrassment was tempered by an intense pleasure. "I bet you say that to all the guys," he said.

Kate laughed, clearly a little embarrassed at herself. And then she leaned over and kissed him. After that, there was no chance at all that he was going to keep his erection hidden.

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Jack watched the girl watching her brother as he leaned over and kissed the young woman from the hospital who'd accompanied them to the park. Her expression was unreadable but he thought she might be jealous. Families were such strange things. And he should know, he could claim a bigger one than most people, though so many of

them were gone now. Sometimes he missed them: his sister Lilly who'd surrendered to lung cancer twenty years ago, or his brother Alec who'd been lost to them long before he'd finally died, wandering the Alzheimer's-induced maze of his own mind. His youngest son, killed in a car crash at eighteen, or his grandniece, passed away before she'd even left the womb.

But most of the time, he accepted that they were gone. They'd lived their life here, however brief and when the time came it had ended. You had to let them go. If you clung on to them you did no one any good, you or them. He'd tried with Lilly, who'd always been his favorite and he'd seen her fight against the pain and the betrayal of her own body to stay with him.

It had been cruel and wrong. He'd realized that, too late, when she was already past hearing his apologies. But it had left him with a determination to accept things, only to fight the fights he could win. Now, he let people go. And in the end he'd let himself go too. Accepting what he couldn't fight. It wasn't like he'd anything to complain about. He'd had a long life, a full one, if not always a good one. Accept it. Let it go. Under the tree, he saw Danny stand up and hold out his hand to Kate. After a moment, she took it and the young man pulled her away, towards the edge of the path, pausing only briefly to grin and wave at his sister. She smiled back, but Jack could see that it was strained, insincere.

Just accept it, he thought. Let it go.

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Kate found that her hand was shaking as she opened the door to the apartment, rattling the key in the lock. She still wasn't quite sure what she was doing. Not only was Danny five years younger than her, barely out of high school, but he was a virtual stranger. She'd only met him three days ago.

But he didn't feel like a stranger. As the key finally slid home and the door pushed open, she realized that she felt like she knew Danny better than anyone. It was something to do with the high intensity of the situations they'd been finding themselves in. She felt like she

knew Jack Cohen pretty well too and all she'd done was share a picnic with him in Central Park. And yeah, Danny was young, but he was an adult. At least he was eighteen acting eighteen, not twenty-four acting forty like Brad.

And, more than anything else, she was attracted to him. When she looked at the gentle curl of his sandy brown hair at his collar, or the play of muscles in his forearm as he courteously held the door open for her, she felt a surge of the kind of straightforward lust she'd all but forgotten about.

As soon as she door shut behind them, she pulled Danny into her arms and began to kiss him. He was tentative, less sure of himself than Brad, or perhaps less sure that this was what she really wanted, but after a time he got into the spirit of it. She was breathless by the time he pulled away.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he said.

Kate smiled, then dragged him over to the sofa and fell across it, pulling him down on top of her. His hard-on was immediately apparent, pressing insistently against her thigh. She felt suddenly shy. It had been a long time since she'd had sex with anyone but Brad and she wondered suddenly if she'd be any good at it. She knew what Brad liked, but discovering a new body, with new desires, was daunting prospect.

Danny, though, seemed to have gained in confidence as she'd lost hers. His mouth returned to hers, tongue probing, and his fingers started fumbling with the buttons of her top. They were false, but he obviously didn't know that, and he was so eager that after a moment she felt one come off in his fingers.

He pulled back to look at it, frowning. She laughed, suddenly feeling better at this reminder that Danny wasn't exactly an expert at the whole sex thing either. Then she sat up a little and pulled the top up and off, flinging it casually to the floor beside the sofa.

Her breasts were fairly small so she hadn't been wearing a bra. Danny stared at them like they were the first ones he'd ever seen. She half expected his tongue to fall out and roll along the floor like a cartoon dog. She grinned. Then he leaned forward and took one of

her breasts into his mouth, biting down gently on the nipple and the smile slipped off her face as she let out a quiet moan.

She leaned backwards, but because she'd moved slightly the back of the sofa was no longer behind her and rather than being supported she found herself sliding inelegantly to the carpeted floor. Danny slid down after her, a surprised expression on his face. His elbow dug sharply and painfully into her ribs on the way down.

She couldn't help it—she started laughing.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry," he said, looking mortified, like he thought he might somehow have blown it.

Still laughing, she began to undo the fly of his jeans, struggling to pull it down over the hard bulge inside.

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As the blue of the sky was darkening and hardening with approaching dusk, Bodil and James came back to rejoin the others. Louise took one look at Bodil's tense and slightly unhappy face and came to the baffling conclusion that she'd made a move on Brit-boy and he'd turned her down. Proving, if it was needed, that he was even more of a moron than she'd initially thought.

But they'd clearly left the park at some point, because they'd picked up a cheap portable stereo, which James set down in the middle of the tartan blanket. "Thought some music might be nice," he said.

Louise looked at him askance. She couldn't imagine what his idea of "nice music" was but she was willing to bet money that it didn't coincide with hers. James seemed to sense her thoughts because he added, "Bodil picked it."

At that, both Mary-Beth and Jack looked slightly apprehensive. She just smiled at them and pulled out a CD of Cole Porter standards. "I was going to get some Outkast, but I thought everyone might prefer this."

"Any wine left?" James asked, gazing uncertainly at the remains of their picnic. It looked like a small herd of hyenas had been at it,

wrappers and breadcrumbs and scraps of meat and chicken bone everywhere.

But Jack smiled and held up another bottle.

"Let me," Louise said, holding up the corkscrew. There was enough in the bottle for them each to have a large plastic glass of the rich burgundy fluid. Louise wasn't used to drinking wine—the occasional family wedding aside—and she didn't find the taste altogether pleasant. She guessed she might learn to like it, but that seemed a stupidly grown-up thing to do. Why train yourself to enjoy stuff you hate when you could be spending even more time enjoying the stuff you already enjoy?

Still, she swallowed it down, enjoying the alcoholic warmth down her throat and in her stomach if nothing else. Bodil had been fiddling with the stereo and after a moment the strains of "Only Fools Fall in Love" drifted out through the grass and trees of the park in Ella Fitzgerald's smoky voice.

Louise leaned back and let the music wash over her. After a moment she opened her eyes and saw James hold out his hand to Bodil, inviting her to dance. He was smiling gently, looking very unlike his normal cynical self. The smile must have affected Bodil because after looking like she was going to refuse, she sighed and took his hand, letting him pull her into his arms. James tried to hold himself stiffly away from her, like someone waltzing in eighteenth-century Vienna. Bodil wasn't having it. She pushed through the circle of his arms and put her own around his neck, resting her head on his chest. Louise didn't think James minded.

Jack looked at Mary-Beth and then at her. "Do you mind?" he asked. Louise realized he was asking whether she cared that she'd be left alone.

She shook her head. "Be my guest. Just be sure to bring her home by eleven."

Jack smiled, then climbed creakily to his feet and bowed to Mary-Beth. It wasn't, Louise thought, a natural gesture for him. He was more a pinch on the cheek or slap on the ass kind of guy. But he seemed to be responding to Mary-Beth's old-fashioned Southern manners. She smiled up at him.

"I think I can spare you one dance," she said.

She needed some assistance from Jack to rise. But when she did and started dancing she was as light on her feet as a puff of cloud. The dying sun suddenly flashed orange through the trees, bathing the whole scene in a golden glow. The figures of the dancers were reduced to black vacancies, like the shapes people left behind after they were gone. The air was growing chillier, as if trying to remind them that summer might be ruling now, but winter would have another turn soon enough.

Like a reflex, she thought about Danny, wondering what he was doing. Then she very quickly quashed that thought. Whatever it was, she really didn't want to know about it.

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Danny couldn't believe this was happening. He couldn't believe Kate had said yes to him, that he was lying on her floor, half on top of her, all the way inside her; so quickly, too. He hadn't even taken his jeans off all the way before they'd started. And it wasn't the only thing that was going to be quick if he wasn't careful. He'd had sex before, of course, but it had always been awkward and with people who didn't mean too much to him.

Despite the fact that he'd known Kate far less time than any of those people, she mattered far more. Their bodies were slick with sweat. They hadn't switched the lights on when they came into the apartment—in too much of a hurry—so as the sun set the world around them darkened. Kate's face was nothing more than an oval of white, features blurred and indistinct. He would have liked to be able to see her better. To fully enjoy the fact that it was her that he was fucking. But there was absolutely no way he was going to stop to switch the light on now.

"Faster," Kate whispered to him, tightening her arms almost painfully round his middle. He did as she asked, though he didn't know how much longer he could last at this faster rate. And he still didn't think she'd come yet. Thought, to be honest, he wasn't entirely sure. The other girls he'd been with had told him they'd climaxed and

they'd made some sort of noise at the end, but they could have been faking it for all he knew.

He didn't want Kate to have to fake it. He wanted this to be the best fuck of her life. He wanted it to be so good that she'd have to come back for more.

It sure as hell was the best fuck of his life.

He felt the tightening in his balls that told him it was going to be over very soon and as he did he looked down at Kate's face. For a brief moment, the setting sun shone through a gap between the buildings opposite and bathed her face in a spectral scarlet glow. He saw that her eyes were very wide, the pupils dark pits. Her teeth were clamped over her lips in an expression that for a horrible moment he thought might be pain. But then she flung her head back and let out a guttural cry, and he felt her body clench around him. An instant later, he released himself into her.

For a brief second, he felt like the king of the world.

Then the door of the apartment opened and Brad walked in.

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Louise saw it about half a second before Jack saw it—but not soon enough to warn him. Unbelievably, it actually was a banana skin. His foot trod on it as he stepped backwards in the two-step he was dancing with Mary-Beth. It must have caught at just the wrong angle, because his leg skidded away almost too fast for Louise to see.

He toppled over forwards, too shocked even to cry out. Louise saw that he was going to fall right on her and scooted away without thinking. It occurred to her an instant later that she probably should have tried to catch him, but by then it was too late.

A younger man might have been able to put out his hands to break his fall. Jack's reflexes were too slow and he was taken too much by surprise. The first part of him to hit the ground was his head. It impacted against the dry soil of the park with an audible *thunk*.

Mary-Beth screamed. Bodil and James turned round from their dance, looking around briefly, trying to work out what had gone wrong when everything still looked so tranquil.



Louise was the first person to do anything useful, though even she was slower than she would have liked. She knelt up and leant over to Jack, then hesitated, remembering long drilled-in advice that you should never move someone who might have hurt their back. The sun had fully set, plunging the park into darkness with summer suddenness. She couldn't even see if Jack was hurt, if he was bleeding at all.

"Jack?" she said tentatively. She had a sick feeling in her stomach. And she was very, very angry with herself. Danny had told her that it might not be over and she hadn't listened to him. Just like she'd refused to listen to him when he'd first told her about his vision. If it was up to her they'd all be dead. She'd even felt the air cooling, the unnatural cold breeze just before this had happened and she'd ignored it.

She'd argued with Danny, bitched at him and let him take all the important decisions, just like she always did, acting like she was two years younger than him instead of two hours. In an unpleasant flash of self-knowledge she realized that she'd never had to take a moment's responsibility for anything in her life because Danny was always around to take it for her. And if her parents or anyone else ever did try to hold her responsible for something she'd done, Danny was there too, defending her, deflecting the blame from her. Danny had grown up in the last two years, she saw now—become the kind of young man who could go away and thrive at a place like NYU—and because he had she'd never had to.

Well, that would all end, she thought, looking down at Jack's still body, the body of the man for whose death she felt horribly responsible. She could change. She would change. And it would start right now.

Then, incredibly, Jack let out a low moan and, pushing on his hands, he levered himself to his feet. He was a little wobbly, but she could see the black blur of his head moving from side to side, taking in his surroundings.

"What happened?" he said.

James laughed suddenly, a loud burst of relieved tension. Louise found that she was doing the same. "He, he... slipped on a banana

skin," she said, barely able to get the words out through the laughter

"You're kidding!" James said.

"Well, I'm glad I've been able to provide you all with such amusement," Jack said dryly, but Louise could tell from his voice that he wasn't annoyed.

"Are you sure you're all right, honey?" Mary-Beth asked, stepping towards him. She peered at his face, but it was no more than an outline in the darkness, the jagged profile of his nose like a flash of antimatter lightning.

"Hold on," Bodil said. She reached inside her jeans and a moment later pulled out what must have been a lighter because there was a spark, a brief gasoline tang and then a wavering orange flame in the air a few feet from Louise.

In the light, Jack's face sprang into sharp focus. His mouth was set into a half smile, though his skin was very pale, so pale even the golden flame left it looking washed out and ghostly.

One of his eyes, deep and dark brown, was twinkling merrily at Mary-Beth as she laid her hand on his arm. But a moment later it narrowed and darkened as he saw the horrified expression on her face, her mouth opening in a silent scream.

His other eye was gone. Sticking out from the ruined gore of its socket was the handle of the corkscrew. The metal blade was buried deep inside his head, only the end of the silver showing, smeared with red blood and the mucus-like vitreous humor of his eyeball. Louise retched as she realized that the small flake of brown sliding wetly down his cheek was all that was left of his iris.

Jack saw them all looking frozen in horror, and instinctively reached up to his own face. His groping hand found the handle of the corkscrew and closed around it instinctively. With a sharp wrench, he pulled it out of his eye.

A gush of fluid followed it, some blood, some clear and sticky. In the flickering orange light still held in Bodil's paralyzed hand, Louise could see that the end of the corkscrew was smeared with mushroom-gray substance that could only be brain matter.

Jack studied the corkscrew in silence for moment, as if considering an abstract mathematical problem. Then his one good eye looked up

and locked with Louise. She saw that it was filled with primal fear.

"No," he croaked. "I don't want to let go..."

And then, like a felled tree, he toppled backwards onto the grass. The newly risen moon reflected from the glassy surface of one eye, and the dark fluids pouring out of the socket of the other.

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Brad stood for a moment, shocked, as he stared at the tableaux in front of him. Danny stared at him, aghast. He felt a momentary impulse to pull out of Kate. But if he did that even more would be on display to her ex-boyfriend than was at present. Instead, he gaped up at the older man like a landed fish.

It took a second for Kate to realize what was going on, lost in the pleasure of her release. When she returned to herself she looked at Danny with a smile before noticing the direction of his gaze and the expression on his face. She looked over at Brad. After a moment, she opened her mouth to say something.

Brad acted before she could. He walked up to the entwined bodies on the floor and with the kind of superhuman strength that only homicidal rage can give, hauled them both to their feet. Then he drew back his fist and punched Danny in the eye.

It was like being hit by a small truck. Danny flew backwards, stumbled against the sofa, then toppled over the back to land in a sprawling heap on his stomach. Before he could even think about getting up, Brad was on him, kicking him viciously in the side. "You little fuck! You little fuck!" he roared over and over.

The pain was fierce and Danny felt the second kick release a wet softness inside him that felt like serious damage. He drew his knees and arms inward in an instinctive defensive gesture. Brad was already drawing his foot back for a third kick when Kate reached him.

She grabbed his arm, trying desperately to drag him away. He ignored her a moment, then, when she succeeded in moving him a few inches, he turned to her and backhanded her across the face with

casual savagery. Danny saw a red hand-shaped welt rise instantly on her cheek and she gave a cry of pain.

With a roar of rage, Danny leapt to his feet. His side was burning with pain, but it was like a bright fire a long way away, something on the periphery of his attention. He'd never felt an anger so intense. He pulled his fist back, ready to pound it into Brad's face and keep on pounding.

But before he could connect, he saw Brad's face suddenly change, his expression of mindless rage giving way to one of shock, and then terror. For a moment, Danny thought that Brad might be afraid of him.

Then he saw the bloom of red spreading fast across Brad's chest. And at the same moment he became conscious that his ears were ringing with the after-effects of a deafening detonation. Kate stared at Brad, one hand held against her injured cheek, the fingers of the other pressed against her mouth.

Brad's mouth opened, then closed. Then his lips were forced back open by the pressure of the fluid behind them and they parted to emit a fountain of blood. It splashed into Danny's eyes, blinding him, and disgustingly into his mouth.

Very slowly, Brad sank to his knees. His eyes were already glazed, seeing something other than the apartment in which he'd lived what Danny now knew were the last three years of his life.

Once Brad was out of the way, Danny could see who'd fired the bullet which killed him. It was the huge man who'd challenged Kate yesterday, who Danny had thought he'd frightened away. Clutched in the meaty folds of the man's hands, lost in it like a child's toy, was a Magnum. The end was plugged with the blunt tube of a silencer. Danny was vaguely aware that there were two more black-clad men behind him, but he wouldn't take his eyes off the shooter.

It was the utter placidity of his face that Danny found most frightening. He'd just killed a man and he looked no more interested, or angry, or excited than someone waiting for their laundry to finish. The muzzle of the gun was pointing at Danny's stomach. He knew that it would only take a second, and he hoped it wouldn't hurt too much. The tiny part of him that wasn't consumed with fear,

wondered how Death would feel about having its carefully ordered plan disrupted in this way.

Then, after a second, the barrel swung round to point at Kate. She wasn't even looking at the man. Her eyes were down with Brad, on the floor, watching the big red pool leaking out of his punctured body to stain the carpet forever.

"Kate Shelley," the man said. "I want a word with you."

# ELEVEN

When Danny regained consciousness it took him a second to figure out where he was. His last clear memory was of making love to Kate and of the expression on her face as she'd come.

He pried his eyes open, surprised at how difficult he found it, and at the stab of pain that accompanied the shaft of light that shone into them. In front of him, he could see Kate's face. But something was wrong. There was a big raised bruise on her forehead with a small cut in its center that was sending a trickle of blood into her eyes. And they didn't seem to be lying down. In fact, they seemed to be hanging up. The air was chilly around them, not like the apartment at all, and there was a horrible raw meat smell in the air. Had they fallen asleep in the kitchen somehow?

Then Kate opened her eyes and as Danny looked into them it all came back to him.

He remembered Brad's death, the man who shot him, and then it all went dark. Judging by the bruise on Kate's head, it looked like they'd both been knocked unconscious and taken somewhere else. As sensation returned more fully, the bruises where Brad had kicked him throbbed dully. Every time he took an in-breath he felt a sharp pain. He suspected that he'd cracked a rib. His top was as bare as it had been when they'd made love on Kate's floor what seemed like years ago. Kate was entirely naked. The chill air was bringing their exposed skin out in painful goose bumps.

But the worst discomfort was in his arms. Like Kate's, they'd been pulled up behind him, suspended on some kind of hook. Looking around him as his eyes cleared, Danny guessed that they were in some kind of warehouse. The interior was almost entirely dark, lit by only a few dull bulbs hanging from the cavernous ceiling. He scanned the length and breadth of the place, peering into the gloom, but there was no sign of Brad's murderer.

"Are you okay?" he asked Kate. His voice was a rusty croak and he realized as soon as he said it what a fucking stupid question it was.

She managed a wan smile, but it dropped an instant later. He suspected she was remembering Brad's death again.

"I'm sorry, about Brad," he said.

She nodded. He wanted to give her some words of comfort, but couldn't think of anything to say. If he told her that everything would be fine, why should she believe him? He didn't believe it himself. The person who'd brought them here hadn't brought them—to this deserted place, where no soul could hear them—to talk.

Danny stared again into the darkness, wondering if the man was already there, watching them, enjoying their pain and terror. Or worse, dispassionately waiting, figuring out how long it would take before they'd be ready for whatever he was planning next. The things he'd do with the same calm, uninterested expression with which he'd killed Brad.

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Louise could tell that the paramedics didn't know what to say when they saw Jack's corpse. She'd told them what had happened—everyone else seemed too shocked to talk—and they'd nodded and made sympathetic noises, but afterwards she'd seen them looking at each other with "can you believe this?" expressions. No doubt, Louise thought bitterly, it would make a great anecdote for their friends.

She realized that she could hear James muttering in the background. He was saying, "a coincidence, a coincidence, a coincidence," over and over, as if that was the only thought he could hold in his head.

"For fuck's sake shut up!" she shouted, spinning round to glare furiously at him. She couldn't believe that, even after this, he still doubted. But when she saw his face, white around the eyes and mouth and so tense that the muscles in his neck were standing out in chords, she realized that it was fear that was making him behave this way. Bodil reached out and put a hand on his arm, but he didn't seem to notice it, just repeated his hopeless mantra over and over again.

Louise couldn't believe how much more Jack's death bothered her than Rinoka's or Peter's. Even though she'd known him less time.

And he'd been older. His death, by any measure, was less of a tragedy. It wasn't just that she'd been standing so close to him when it happened. He'd seemed like someone who really used the life that was given him. It seemed wrong that it should be taken away from him, even now, when so many people just wasted theirs.

She turned her face away as his body was loaded onto the ambulance, even though it was covered with a red blanket. Mary-Beth, though, stared at it as it was loaded in, and continued staring long after the ambulance doors were closed. She looked on the point of collapse.

And everyone, Louise was sure, was wondering who was going to be next. As she began to emerge from the haze of shock that had followed the death, it occurred to her that only two people knew the answer to that, and neither of them were here. She had to find Danny and tell him what had happened.

She pulled out her cell and speed-dialed. The phone rang and rang but there was no answer. Probably too busy getting down and dirty with Kate. Fuck! She'd have to go and get him. He'd told her Kate's address the first time he'd gone round and though her geography of New York was still a little shaky, she didn't think it was that far from here, somewhere up on the east side of the park.

"I've got to find Danny," she said to the others.

"Can't you phone him?" Bodil said. Her eyes were dull and glassy but she seemed to have coped with Jack's death better than the others.

"Wow," Louise said with heavy sarcasm. "I'd never have thought of that. Thanks."

"He's not answering?" Mary-Beth asked. Louise knew what her tone of voice meant. It meant he wasn't answering because something had happened to him, because death had moved on to the next person on his list. Louise absolutely refused to believe that.

"Probably fu—" she realized who she was talking to, "—I mean, busy. I'm gonna go round there. You should get back to the hotel and stay there till Danno and me get back."

James shook his head. The back of his hand was pressed against his mouth as if trying to prevent a scream getting out. He moved it



briefly to speak then put it straight back again. "You can't go. The paramedics told us the police are going to want to talk to us about what happened."

"Then you talk to them," Louise said, and started trotting away before they could argue any further.

It took her forty minutes to find Kate's block, a bland stone-faced affair. Five minutes to climb the stairs and then ride the elevator to her apartment. About thirty seconds to jimmy open the door.

Then she stood, paralyzed, for what seemed like an eternity as she saw what was lying on the floor. The young man's body lay sprawled across the deep pile carpet. His face had the plastic cast of a shop dummy. The eyes were as glassy as a doll's. His mouth was hanging open, a gush of dried blood spreading away from it like the flood plain of a river. He'd collapsed onto his knees and then fallen sideways in a position so unnatural it was only possible in death. Louise thought, irrelevantly, that it looked horribly uncomfortable. She found herself fighting an urge to move him into a better position, stop him getting cramps in his long-dead legs.

She'd seen more death in the last few days than she'd ever expected to see in her life. It wasn't his corpse that froze her. It was the thought of what it meant. What it meant for Danny. After a few moments more staring at the body, she looked round the rest of the lounge. There was no sign of Danny or Kate, but she could see their clothes, flung casually around the sofa. Danny's blue Lakers T-shirt was tangled with Kate's lacy underwear, seeming to embrace it.

Louise had to make an effort, an almost superhuman one, to leave that room and search the rest of the apartment. The thought that Danny might be lying somewhere, as cold and lifeless as the body in the lounge, was a pain so unendurable she didn't think she could survive it. And if she never saw it, if she never actually found him, then it wouldn't be real, would it? She could go on believing that he was still alive, somewhere just out of sight, for as long as she needed.

Except she had to know. Dragging legs that felt as heavy as the great boulders of Monument Valley, she walked deeper into the apartment.

It didn't take long to make sure Danny wasn't there. She gasped with relief, but it was short-lived. If he wasn't here, where was he? Whatever the answer, she knew it couldn't be good. Fingers clumsy with haste and fear, she dug out her cell and dialed his number again.

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Danny felt the vibration a moment before he heard his phone ringing out for the second time through the empty warehouse. It was in the front pocket of his jeans. The last time it had rung he'd nearly wrenched his arms out of his sockets trying to reach it, but it was futile.

This time, he tried a different tack. He pulled himself up by his arms, lifting his feet with painful slowness away from the floor. It was agonizing. His arms were already suffering from their long restraint in this unnatural position. And putting this pressure on them, he was sure he was doing permanent damage. Didn't matter. He was quite sure that unless he could answer that phone, permanent wouldn't last very long at all.

Inch by painful inch he curled himself upwards, like an exercise he'd done in school gymnastics before he'd discovered that he was better on the track. But he'd still been good at this. He'd been able to do it. And he would do it now. With his body curled like this, the phone was only a tantalizing five inches away from his mouth. Straining every muscle in his body, he curled further pushing himself an inch, two inches, closer. The strain was enormous. He was afraid that at any moment his shoulder joints would pull out of their sockets and that would be the end of it. They were already screaming their agony through every nerve of his body. And the phone wouldn't ring forever. Any moment now it would switch to answer. He clenched every muscle he could find, and pulled himself up a further inch. His lips brushed against the phone's aerial, poking from his pocket.

Then a hand reached in and pulled the phone away.

With a whoosh of air, he released himself, his legs falling to the ground with a heavy thump. The man who had killed Brad stood in front of him, looking down at the display of the phone. "Louise?" he said. "You sure got a lot of girls chasing after you for a chicken-shit little bastard."

The man dropped the phone to the concrete floor of the warehouse and crushed it underneath one booted foot. Then he looked back up at Danny. His eyes, almost lost in the fleshy folds of his face, seemed calm, without malice, as if the words he was saying were entirely divorced from any emotion which might motivate them. There was something truly terrifying about those eyes, about having their attention on you. But Danny was still glad they were looking at him, because if they were looking at him, they weren't looking at Kate, who was hanging helpless and naked beside him.

"Hey, I haven't introduced myself," the man said with horribly feigned friendliness. "I'm Tim, Tiny Tim to most people." He held out a hand, as if for Danny to shake, then he seemed to realize what he was doing and dropped it back to his side. "And you're...?"

Danny couldn't see any reason not to tell him. But he hesitated a moment, not wanting to give anything away he didn't have to. And driven by the same stubbornness that had sent him climbing mountains other people told him were suicidal, or tackling waves even experienced surfers shied away from.

Without even seeming to think about it, the man lashed out his hand, striking Danny across the mouth. He seemed to be using barely a fraction of his strength to do it. It was almost an afterthought. But the force of the blow whiplashed Danny's head to the side, and he felt two teeth in the side of his mouth loosen. His lip split, filling his mouth with the warm coppery taste of his own blood.

"Danny King," Danny said, his voice mushy and weak with pain.

But the man, Tim, didn't even seem to care. He'd already turned to Kate. His small, calm eyes swept up and down her naked body, then up and down it again.

"I don't know what you want with me," Kate said, in a voice so shaky the words were barely distinguishable. "But whatever you think I've done, I haven't done it."

Tim continued looking at her while he very slowly drew out a knife. Its blade glittered dully in the light of the bare bulbs overhead. It was a very small, business-like knife, the kind you could slip between a rival's ribs and he wouldn't even notice it go in. Very slowly, he brought it up until the tip was hovering only an inch from Kate's eye. She shut it, trying to flinch away, but her restraint left her no room. Then Tim moved the knife forward, digging it into the thin flesh of her lid until Danny saw it part and bleed.

"For fuck's sake, leave her alone!" Danny screamed. "You fucking bastard!"

Tim ignored him completely, just pressing the knife even deeper. The tip must be touching the eyeball by now.

Kate whimpered softly, a word that might have been "Don't."

Then Tim took the knife back and casually ran his finger along its blade. "We know you know who killed Tony," he said.

"Please," Kate gasped. "We don't even know who Tony is! You've got to believe me. I'm a student, a med student and Danny's at high school. He's just a kid, he's—" Her words cut off abruptly as Tim lashed out with the knife in a wide elegant arc that left a thin line of blood across her breasts.

And, through it all, Tim's eyes kept their same blank look, as if when he saw Danny and Kate he didn't even see members of the same species. There was no empathy, no connection possible to this man. He could do anything to them, Danny knew and once it was over he'd never think of it again.

"You little bitch, do you think you're going to get out of here alive?" Tim asked.

Sobbing, Kate shook her head.

Tim reached out and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look up at him. Her face seemed terribly small and delicate in his vast hand. "Listen, the family, they want you to suffer. But I don't hold with that. Far as I'm concerned, killing you is enough. So if you tell me everything, who you're working for, why they wanted Tony dead, then I'll just kill you. Otherwise I'll do exactly what the family want. And then when I've finished with you, you'll tell me anyway. Choice is yours."

"But I don't know!" Kate said. "Please, I'd tell you if I did, but I don't know what you're talking about!"

Tim's expression seemed to harden, the muscles moving beneath his skin to shift his face into an expression that was barely even human. "You know what? I'm gonna give you some time to consider that. First, I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do to your boyfriend. Then I'm going to do it all, the exact same thing, to you. Only you I'm also gonna fuck, halfway through, when you've still got most of your face."

He then raised the knife and turned to Danny.

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Mary-Beth sat in the crowded reception area of the police station, beside James and Bodil. She saw that Bodil's hand was held tightly between two of James's. They were talking together in soft, murmuring voices, but his knuckles were white with strain and she thought he might have been hurting the Danish girl, though she didn't complain. Any human contact, even harsh contact, was better than none at a time like this.

Mary-Beth knew she ought to be offering comfort to the children. It was her job, after all, but more than that as a human being she'd always prided herself on being someone people could turn to in a time of crisis. But some time in the last few days something had happened and all the certainties by which she'd guided her life had been lost to her, most of all the certainties about herself. She'd thought she was strong, but this was too much for her. She felt on the edge of madness, never quite tipping over.

She wished, profoundly, that someone would just take her hand and tell her everything was going to be all right.

The officer had told them he'd be with them shortly, but that had been half an hour ago and there was still no sign of him. Mary-Beth dimly guessed that that might be a good sign. He obviously didn't think they were important enough to rush, so he wasn't treating Jack's death as in any way suspicious. Though, probably, if he started entering their names in any kind of database and saw just how many

deaths they'd been connected to in the last few days he'd have a change of heart.

She didn't really know what she thought about getting arrested. There was something almost comforting in the thought. Being locked up, someone else put in charge of all the important decisions in her life. Suddenly she could see the appeal of that.

Then she took a look around the room and she wasn't so sure. It was crowded, cluttered with desks and the police officers who owned them and between the desks or sitting in front of them, or being led through, handcuffed, were the reason for the station's existence.

The station was in a good part of town, but you wouldn't know that to look at the people inside it. Criminals were the same everywhere, she guessed, though back home in South Carolina she didn't think they'd had quite the same hard look, as if all the human feeling had been boiled off them like steam.

She could see two women, standing screaming at a cop in high, shrill voices. She guessed that they were only in their twenties, but their faces were as marked by care and pain as eighty year-olds. Their cheeks were hollowed out, their hair hung in strings and their lips were nothing more than thin slashes across their lower faces. Drug addicts, she guessed and hookers too to judge by their skimpy skirts and spiky high heels. They looked like people whose lives held no joy at all.

The shaven-headed young men clustered around another cop seemed to take joy, but at all the wrong things. Their bodies were covered in tattoos, many the rough blurred blue that came from prison and they bulged with muscle and aggression. They were shouting at the cops, too, gesticulating wildly, faces screwed up with hate.

And then there were the down-and-outs, the people who'd reached the bottom and kept on dropping. Even from here, she could smell the alcohol and sweat reek from one of them. They weren't arguing with the cops, or anyone. These were people who'd given up on everything, including themselves.

No, she wouldn't want to spend the rest of her life locked up with people like this. There was an aura of barely suppressed violence

about the whole place. It was like the zoo, she suddenly thought, but far, far worse. Things caged that were ready to commit the worst sort of violence as soon as they were let out.

She became aware that the voices coming from beside her were getting louder. Distractedly, she tuned in to the conversation.

"I can't believe you," Bodil was saying. "What will it take to convince you? Really, what?"

James grimaced and he wouldn't meet her eye, but he wouldn't give in either. "I'm just saying, as soon as you start looking for patterns you're bound to find them. It's human nature. We're pattern recognition machines. But it doesn't mean the patterns are really there. It could still all be..." he trailed off, as if he knew that what he was saying was absurd, but then he seemed to rally again. "It's all this huge, horrible coincidence. And thinking anything else is just going to end up as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you start looking for trouble you're bound to end up finding it."

"What," Bodil hissed angrily, "the way that Jack was looking to get a corkscrew through his eye?"

"But the corkscrew was there, on the grass. We'd been having wine. It wasn't that unlikely that someone would fall onto it. You certainly don't need a supernatural reason to explain it." James sounded almost pleading, as if begging her to agree—because if he convinced her he might end up convincing himself.

Bodil shook her head and Mary-Beth saw her pull her fingers angrily out of James's grip. "You are fucking unbelievable, do you know that?"

"Why?" James said angrily. Mary-Beth thought he was genuinely hurt by Bodil's rejection, but he seemed unable to stop behaving in the way that was causing it. "Because I'm rational? Because I refuse to believe in some fairy tale when there's a perfectly scientific explanation for everything that's happened?"

"Jesus Christ, James!" Bodil was shouting now. Mary-Beth saw people throughout the station turning to look at them with dull curiosity. Only the gang she'd noticed earlier remained uninterested, focused on their own confrontation.

"You know," Bodil continued, her voice rising with every word, "even Scully started believing in aliens eventually, after she'd seen them with her own fucking eyes!"

James folded his arms over his chest, a childish defensive gesture. Mary-Beth had a sudden, clear mental image of him as a boy, curling in on himself as he settled down with a book, cutting out everything around him and choosing to live in his own world, just as he was doing now. Who could really blame him, if that world was so much more pleasant than the real one?

"I'm just saying, we don't all have to sit back and say we're doomed to die. We just need to be careful, normally careful the way normal people are and we'll be fine."

Bodil opened her mouth to argue and then she must have seen something in James's expression that even he didn't know was there, because she shut her mouth and just took his hand. "Yeah," she said quietly. "If we're careful we'll be okay."

After that they sat in silence and Mary-Beth's attention moved outward again, into the room. The atmosphere out there felt even more tense, like a sky that was just waiting to unleash an almighty thunderstorm. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She found herself unconsciously tensing up, curving her head down, trying to get into a fetal ball to make herself as small a target as possible for what was coming.

If she'd been on her own, she would have just gone with it. Crouched down and let whatever was going to happen, happen. And if she didn't survive it, well...

But her eyes caught the two hands of the children beside her, clasped together so fiercely, and she suddenly felt like she was coming back into herself. She had a duty, a duty to them and the young life they represented. She could give up on herself, but she had no right to give up on them.

And even as she was thinking this, another part of her was observing the room and it spotted the exact moment when it started.

One of the angry white youths, a bald-headed slab of a man with the tattoo of a cross on his cheek, reached an empty hand inside his jacket and when he pulled it out again it wasn't empty any more.



Mary-Beth's weren't the only eyes that spotted it. Across the room, a wave of awareness seemed to sweep, catching all the police officers in its tide. Everywhere, hands reached for guns.

Without even realizing she was doing it, MaryBeth flung herself at Bodil and James. She swept them off the bench and onto the floor beside it, shielding them with her body, for what scant protection her fragile flesh and bones could offer.

Then the hail of bullets began. She felt the wind of their passage, so near that one seemed to ruffle her hair. The sound was deafening, drowning out the screams and the roars of rage. The bullets were coming from the white gang, all of whom had now drawn their guns. She couldn't believe that they hadn't been searched before coming here, that no one had thought to disarm them, but then she'd learned that when death had determined to pay a visit, nothing would stand in its way.

A moment later, a second hail of bullets struck, in the opposite direction, lethal shards of metal making straight for the gang that had begun the fight.

In between, throughout the station, everyone else was flinging themselves to the floor. But many of them had reacted too late. She could see bodies twisting and tumbling, riddled with red holes. Blood was everywhere. The room already smelled like a slaughterhouse. Right in the middle, equidistant between the two groups, she could see one young man, his face bland and amiable, standing upright, head turned insouciantly towards the police officers and their guns.

For a second she couldn't understand why he was just standing there, why he didn't try to run for cover. Then she saw the streams of blood that were pouring from his body, the way it was quivering slightly, like a plucked string. And she realized that he was being held upright by the force of the bullets plunging into him from both sides.

After that she just put her head down and prayed.

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Louise ran from the apartment, down to the street, but then she couldn't think what to do. Her head felt hazy and light with panic.

Then it occurred to her that she should call the police. This was exactly what they were there for. Her hand was reaching for her cell; she'd even pressed the nine and the one when she suddenly stopped.

The police would have all sorts of questions for her. They'd have forensics experts who'd spend hours combing the scene, looking for the smallest hair or fiber. She'd seen it on *CSI*. And by the time they found anything, her brother would be dead.

But there was a way she could track him down. She carefully deleted the nine and the one then put in a new number. A moment later, a man's voice answered. "Welcome to the GPS positioning service, how may I help you?"

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After what seemed an eternity, the gunfire stopped. Mary-Beth waited at least a minute till she raised her head. The scene that greeted her was like a vision of Armageddon. There were bodies everywhere. Some of them were twitching and moaning, but most lay ominously still. The floor was literally running with blood.

The police officers had won, if you could call it that. None of the gang were left on their feet and a few of the officers were. Some of them were standing stock still, locked rigid by shock. Others let out loud gales of laughter, hugging their friends or punching the air in high-school victory gestures.

But they weren't what mattered. The people beneath her were. Very slowly, she rose to her feet. And, beside her, James and Bodil rose too. They were completely unharmed.

They both surveyed the destruction around them with expressions almost of awe. Eventually, James turned to Mary-Beth. "Thanks," he said.

She shook her head. "Don't thank me. It's my duty to protect you."

It didn't take them too long to get out of the police station after that. The police officers weren't in much of a state to be taking statements and it was pretty clear that neither Mary-Beth nor the youngsters had been involved in the action. She left them her name and contact details and promised to come back in tomorrow.

Outside, on the street, once they'd pushed through the cluster of emergency personnel and vehicles that crowded the street, she was amazed at how normal everything looked, as if nothing at all had happened. The night was bright and clear, stars competing to cast their light against a perfect full moon. The silver disc of it hung, framed between the buildings.

"Well, I'm certainly getting to see every aspect of New York on this trip," Bodil said after they'd been walking along for a few minutes in silence. "It's been very educational." Her voice wavered a little, but she sounded basically okay.

James laughed. "Do you think they'll give us a refund?" He looked at Mary-Beth.

She smiled back at him, so very glad that she'd been able to preserve these two young lives. "Don't tell me you haven't enjoyed it?" They were in one of the streets that led all the way down to the Hudson and a chill breeze seemed to be coming in off the water. She shivered a little, pulling her thin sweater tighter around her.

Ahead of them scaffolding blocked the sidewalk. The air was filled with a metallic clattering and after a moment she picked out the dark forms of workmen hanging from it. Navajos, she saw as they got closer, more usually to be found scaling the heights of Manhattan's skyline. She heard the buzz of the saw that one was using to cut through the wooden frame of the half-derelict building.

She smiled at one as she passed, feeling a contentment so great it needed to be shared, and after a moment looking at her with dark considering eyes, he smiled back and tipped his spanner up to his forehead in a mock salute.

The end of the spanner caught against something as he dropped it back down. It was only a small bolt. Normally it wouldn't have mattered, but they'd put this up in a hurry, not paid enough for the job to take the proper care, and sure that they'd be finished before any problems showed.

The bolt jolted out of its mooring. The wood that it was holding loosened. And, at that exact same moment, a pigeon—confused by the bright moon into thinking that it was daylight—landed on the board.

The weight was just enough. The board creaked—and then fell. The Navajo builder on it let out a cry of shock and grabbed for the metal strut of the scaffolding above him to steady himself.

But that, too, was only holding on by a thread. The extra weight pulled it free and it also began to fall, bringing more men down with it.

From the ground, it looked like a collapsing house of cards. It would have been comical if it hadn't been heading straight for their heads. Acting on instinct, James shoved Bodil in front of him, out of the path of the falling wood and metal. At the same time he reached behind him and grabbed Mary-Beth's hand, pulling her away from the debris. An inch behind her head, a ten-foot long metal strut clanged to the ground. A moment later, a wooden plank flew straight at James. He ducked, then realized that this would leave MaryBeth to take the brunt and instead lashed upwards frantically with his arm. It diverted the plank from its course, but the jarring impact felt like a hammer blow on his wrist. He cried out in pain and cradled his arm against his chest as he continued to run.

He was looking behind him, at the toppling scaffolding, so he didn't see the car parked on the curb until he barreled straight into it. For a second, he made to carry on running, but then he realized that they were far enough away and he turned around to watch the scaffolding as it fell.

It was very impressive, in an awful way. The whole structure was collapsing in on itself, telescoping like a huge folding chair. Most of the men, James saw, had managed to jump clear. Only one, still holding grimly to his chainsaw, remained clinging to the scaffolding. As they watched, the final strut began to give way with a shriek of tortured metal. The man lost his footing. And the chainsaw in his hand began to swing round towards his own head.

Mary-Beth gasped out in fear and took a step towards the struggling builder, as if there was something she might be able to do to help him.

The man seemed to realize the danger he was in at the last moment. As his feet dropped out from under him, he flung the chainsaw as far away from him as possible.

It flew diagonally across the street, missing a lamppost by a few inches.

But the chainsaw was still running. It was still plugged in. Behind it trailed the long power cord which supplied it with its electricity. For a few seconds it remained slack, until the saw reached the end of its length. Then, suddenly and forcefully, it tightened.

Inside the building, the force should have pulled the cord's plug from its socket. But at that precise moment, another builder, who'd clung on to a window frame as the scaffolding fell, managed to lever himself in through the broken glass. To do it, he was forced to shove a heavy oak table out of his way.

The oak table wedged itself tightly in the corner, flush against the plug.

The plug remained firmly in place.

Outside, the chainsaw reached the apogee of its swing and the cord snapped taught—pulling against the upright pole of the lamppost. The chainsaw was heavy and it was moving fast. It had too much momentum to lose so quickly. Instead, the lamppost redirected the chainsaw's swing. Suddenly, rather than traveling straight towards the other wall, the saw was rotating around the lamp post as the cord wound itself tight round the pole.

A second before, the chainsaw had been traveling away from James, Bodil and Mary-Beth. Now it was heading straight towards them.

Mary-Beth had time to let out one short cry of alarm before the chainsaw, loud and buzzing, took her through the neck. It cut straight through the flesh and bone as easily as if it they were air, not even noticeably slowing. The teeth of the saw chewed up and spat out the flesh, spattering James and Bodil with Mary-Beth's blood.

It happened so quickly, her head remained in place as the chainsaw swung through and out, continuing its circuit of the lamppost. Mary-Beth was dead, but her brain didn't quite know it yet. Her eyes, wide blue and pleading, sought out James's. She opened her mouth, but only a very quiet sigh emerged.

And then the chainsaw came round on its second circuit. It was lower now, taking her through the middle, neatly cutting beneath her

ribs. This time the teeth spattered the mauve and yellow flesh of her organs at them, as well as the dark brown mess of digested food from her gut, split by the saw like a ripe melon.

Maybe Mary-Beth tried to look down to see what had happened to her. Maybe her body started to collapse. Whatever the reason, her head finally tipped forward and began to topple from her neck.

Frozen in place, James could see the neat cross-section of her neck that it left behind, the white circle of her spine surrounded by a mush of pink flesh all held together by a delicate layer of skin.

Her head was still falling towards the ground when the saw came round for its final pass. It took her through the ankles this time. It also caught the falling head, drawing a line through it from just beneath her nose to just above her ears. Dissected, the head fell apart in two neat halves. The brain, exposed within, still seemed to be pulsing gently, as if it didn't know yet that it was dead.

That was when James, finally, believed.

# TWELVE

The GPS service told Louise that Danny's cell was somewhere down in the lower southeast corner of Manhattan, an area she vaguely recalled being referred to as Alphabet City. Not even waiting to finish the phone call, she flung herself at the nearest cab. It was raining now, a light summer shower and there were plenty of other people trying to get the same cab, some of who had been there before her.

Tough shit. She elbowed one over-made-up young woman aside, ignoring her indignant gasp, pulled on the collar of a suited businessman to drag him out of the way, and hopped into the back of the cab, slamming the door and locking it before anyone had really realized what was going on.

"Avenue D," she said to the driver, who nodded calmly and checked behind him as he pulled away leisurely from the curb as if he had no fucking sense of urgency at all.

Even as they began to move, Louise leaning forward in her cramped seat as if this might somehow induce the cab to travel faster, she knew that this entire exercise might be futile. If Danny didn't have his cell phone with him then no GPS service in the world would let her find him.

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"Don't do it to him, do it to me!" Kate shouted and Danny thought it was the bravest thing he'd ever heard because what Tim was doing to him was terrible.

He hadn't known what real pain was, until now. He'd taken falls, even broken bones before, but those had been one-offs. It was the unrelenting nature of the punishment being dished out to him that made it so unendurable. Some part of him was amazed that he hadn't passed out yet, that his mind could endure this level of agony and not switch itself off. And so far Tim had only used his fists.

Danny had known that fists could bruise, but he'd never really realized that they could cut before. That blow as hard as the ones Tim was dealing him would break his skin over his flesh like a ripe tomato splitting beneath a boot heel. In the background, he could hear the continuous pleading of Kate, begging Tim to stop, telling him that Danny hadn't done anything. But Danny couldn't really concentrate on that. One of Tim's first blows had smashed his ear. He could feel the bloody pulp of his lobe smeared against his head. It seemed to have broken something vital inside, too. He could hear nothing through it but an angry whining, like a mosquito in the night that wouldn't leave you alone.

If Danny had known the thing Tim wanted to know, he was certain he would have told him. But he didn't and all he could do was endure the punishment, knowing that the only relief from it would be death.

And then Tim pulled out his knife.

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James could think of nothing but getting back to the hotel as quickly as possible. The blood from MaryBeth was still drying on his clothes and in red freckles on his face and he wanted more than anything for it to be gone, but he couldn't spare the time to wipe it off. It was Bodil, who made them stop to buy supplies, as many bottles of water as they could carry, packets of chips and cookies. She would have bought some canned food, too, but James forbade her.

Where before he'd been blind to the danger, now he saw death in everything. He looked at the cans, and all he could see were the sharp edges of their lids and how they would dig into his flesh if, by some freak accident, he fell in their vicinity. How the cans could sever the artery in his wrists, or his neck, or the delicate ones buried in his thighs. So he told her not to buy the cans and he asked that everything be packed in paper, seeing a choking death in the plastic bag the store assistant offered them.

When they got to the hotel, Bodil wanted them to go to her room, but hers was on the first floor and his was on the third so he insisted that they go to his. On the first floor they were too vulnerable to



attack from the street. What if a car or a truck hit the hotel? What if more gun-wielding lunatics burst in?

As soon as they were inside, they locked the door behind them and he took the planks of wood and the hammer and nails he'd bought from the hardware store. But when he made to start banging the planks across the door, securing them inside the room, he hesitated. His mind was filled with images of all the things that could go wrong, the hammer hitting his hand instead of the nail, starting a blood clot that would work its way round to his heart and stop it. The nail missing the door and plunging into his thumb instead, depositing little flecks of rust and dirt that would poison the blood inside his veins and stop his heart. The wood, splintering, sending lethal shards towards his exposed eyes, ears, throat...

"What are you waiting for?" Bodil asked.

"What if I... What if something goes wrong?" James said.

"Oh, for God's sake!" Bodil snatched the hammer and nails from his unresisting fingers and banged them into the planks, attaching them to the doorframe with a few short strokes. Then she strung the chains they'd bought across in a crisscross pattern.

Outside, James could hear a raised voice, perhaps the hotel manager wondering what the hell they were doing. He ignored it. As soon as Bodil was finished, he took the nails from her and threw them out of the window to clatter onto the sidewalk below. Some of the drivers of the gridlocked cars turned to stare, clearly wondering where the shower of metal was coming from. James ignored them and, checking that there was no one walking nearby, he flung the hammer out too.

Then he turned round to inspect the room. With his new eyes, it looked like a death trap. The faucets in the bathroom glittered at him, daring him to strike something against their hard, sharp edges. The doorknob looked just the right height and shape to catch him in the groin. The bedclothes seemed designed to tangle and choke him. And the electric sockets in the wall were just waiting for some water to drip on them and electrocute them both. They should start with those, he decided.

"Get some of that masking tape..." he said, turning to Bodil.

Then he saw what she had in her hand. She was smoking a joint. "What the hell are you doing?" he screamed.

"Oh, I got some weed off a man in the club," she said. "I thought it would help us to relax. You know, in the circumstances."

James was momentarily speechless. Then he grabbed the joint from her hand, dropped it to the floor and stamped on it repeatedly. "Are you trying to get us killed?"

"It's just a joint," Bodil protested, looking sadly at the squashed remains on the linoleum floor.

"Don't you understand?" James realized that he was still shouting and made a conscious effort to calm his voice. "Death can get us any way, with anything. It killed Jack with a corkscrew, for fuck's sake! We can't give it any opening. We have to be afraid of everything."

Bodil opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. He could see from the tight set of her shoulders and the pallor of her skin that she knew he was right.

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"Go faster, can't you?" Louise shouted at the driver, but she knew that he couldn't. All around them the traffic was thickening like congealing blood.

"Sorry, miss," the driver said in a thick Middle Eastern accent. "Problem with subway. Everyone on the roads."

Louise felt so frantic it was as if her stomach was rising up through her throat to strangle her. She wanted to strangle the driver. She wanted to choke the driver of every single car between her and her brother.

Then she realized that they were only a block away from the hotel. Her motorbike was still parked in its basement garage. She screamed at the driver to stop.

He was still going a good ten miles an hour when she flung a handful of bills at him and threw herself out of the car and onto the sidewalk. The momentum pushed her to her knees, scraping them painfully against the asphalt. She rolled with it, coming up on her

feet and running towards the hotel garage before she even had time to register the pain.

\*\*\*

Tim started out by carving out his name in Danny's chest. Danny watched the blood pouring from the deep gashes and thought that he'd be scarred for life before remembering with numb resignation that that wouldn't really matter now.

The "T" and the "I" were easy to take, just three straight strokes. The pain didn't even begin until after they'd ended, opening up in his mind as his flesh opened in the wake of the knife. He could see, he realized, the thin yellow layer of fat beneath his skin. Then Tim began on the "M." Danny just concentrated on not screaming, on not giving Tim the satisfaction of that. It was the only victory he could hope for.

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After they'd taped up all the electric sockets, and taped James's clothes around all the sharp edges in the room, and padded the hard surface of the bath with his quilt and thrown anything small and flammable or sharp out of the window, Bodil insisted that they take a break. James wanted to argue, felt a jittery need to be doing something, but he could think of nothing further to do. And, he realized, the more he moved about, the more danger he'd be in.

Gingerly, he sat on the bare mattress of the bed. After a moment, Bodil sat beside him. She shifted around uncomfortably for a few moments, then moved the two pillows so that they could use them as backrests against the wall.

"So," she said, "you've had what I suppose they call a 'road to Damascus' experience?" She was smiling slightly, looking lightly amused.

"How can you possibly still be joking at a time like this?" James asked incredulously.

Bodil's expression became more serious. "Isn't this the best time to joke?"

"Laugh in the face of the death, you mean?" James said. "I always thought that was one of those things that worked in theory but never in practice."

"So what do you think about it?" Bodil asked. "Death, I mean. What do you think happens afterwards?"

James found it very hard to concentrate on anything except the intense terror he was keeping tamped down only by a supreme effort of will. But he tried to give her question some serious consideration. "I believe it's the end. Once we're gone, we're gone."

"That's what I used to think too," Bodil said.

"Really?" Somehow, he'd imagined that she'd have some sort of wishy-washy belief in circles of life and reincarnation and all that crap.

She smiled, hearing the surprise in his voice. "Yes. I mean, I did think about reincarnation for a while, but then I realized I only wanted to believe it to stop me being frightened of death. And that's not a good reason for thinking something's true."

"You sound like me," James said.

"But now," she continued, ignoring him, "if there is this force, Death, that's out to get us, that makes me think there might be other things too. That heaven and God or anyway some good stuff to balance out the bad stuff, that that might also be real."

At her words, James was surprised to find his fear diminishing a little. It did make a weird sort of sense. Once you changed your axioms, he supposed, the theories that grew from that had to change too. And his axioms had certainly changed in a major way over the last few weeks. Maybe it was okay, intellectually, to believe in something like an afterlife.

"James," she said, looking him in the eye. She rarely used his given name, and the sound of it on her lips gave him something like pleasure. "Would you make love to me?"

"Bodil..." he didn't know what he was going to say, whether he was going to agree or object, but she put her hand firmly over his mouth.

"Please, I like you, really. It would be nice to think we could take things slowly, get to know each other, maybe keep in touch once we get back home. But do you really think that's going to happen?" He

hesitated a moment, then shook his head. "So shouldn't we take our chance while we've still got it?"

He didn't answer her, just moved her hand gently from his mouth, leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. He was amazed to realize that this was the first time he'd kissed her, even though they'd started to do far more in the zoo. It felt great. After a few seconds she opened her mouth and thrust her tongue aggressively past his lips and into his. That felt entirely in character and he laughed a little as she pushed him backwards onto the bed.

They didn't bother much with foreplay. Within a couple of minutes her pants and his were undone, and she'd clasped his cock—such an odd but wonderful feeling, to have someone else's hand on it—and was pushing it inside her. He'd expected to feel more nervous the first time, or to fumble and get it wrong, but it all seemed so natural and straightforward that he wondered why he'd been so anxious about it for so long.

As soon as he was in, he pushed himself up on his elbows and began thrusting in and out of her. Nothing in his life had ever felt this good. No jerkoff, no adolescent conversations, no porn movie could prepare him for the sensation of moving inside the moist, clasping warmth of a real, live woman.

And then, at the edge of his senses, he became aware that there was another noise in the room beside his grunts of effort and Bodil's little moans of pleasure. He paused for a moment and the noise became clearer. Or, no, it was getting louder. Beneath him, Bodil looked up at him in puzzlement. Then she heard it too. It was almost deafening now.

He rolled away from Bodil and sat up on the bed, his racing heart rate now nothing to do with what they'd just been doing.

And as soon as he looked at the opposite wall, he saw them. Emerging from a tiny hole near the junction with the ceiling, so small he hadn't even seen it, were tens, then hundreds of small, black-and-yellow bodies. Hornets. Their vicious buzzing sounded exactly like a saw as it cut through flesh.

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Louise had decided the only way to do it was to treat the traffic as an obstacle course, something immovable that she had to weave in and out of, race around and—on one occasion—over. She spent as much time on the sidewalk as the road, where the pedestrians became an obstacle course too. There were two of them ahead of her now, oblivious for the moment to the motorbike racing towards them.

She began to swerve to the right, meaning to cut through the narrow gap between the blond-haired man and the Mercedes hugging the curve. But people aren't inanimate obstacles, and when he saw her, a moment after the look of horror crossed his face, he dived sideways—and straight into her intended path.

Louise cursed and wrenched the handlebars hard to the left. But her body was still leaning right and the bike's wheel skidded out from under her, toppling her onto the sidewalk beneath the bike. If she'd been wearing her leathers the fall wouldn't have been so bad. As it was, she felt it scrape all the skin away from her thigh and shoulder, leaving the raw, agonized flesh beneath exposed to the air.

She didn't care. As soon as the bike had ground to a halt she pushed it upright again, jumped on and gunned it down the street. Somewhere behind her she could hear sirens. It was possible that they were after her. Didn't matter. They were stuck in this hellish gridlock along with everyone else. They could arrest her after she'd saved Danny.

James had had a horror of insects since he was a small boy and woke in the night to find a spider crawling over his face. And spiders couldn't even really hurt him, not the harmless kind you found in England. Hornet stings hurt like hell. Enough of them could kill him easily.

He clambered out of the bed and backed away from the hornets faster than he'd ever moved before.

In his haste, he didn't even see the stub of Bodil's joint lying on the floor. His heel caught it and flung it backwards, towards the bed. It landed right in the middle of the pillow he'd been sitting on a few moments before.

The joint had looked like it was out. But it wasn't. Somewhere in its heart, a tiny spark was still smoldering. On the linoleum floor there had been nothing for it to feed on. But the pillow was low quality, synthetic material. Highly flammable.

The spark met more food, and began to devour it. A gust of wind blew in from nowhere, fanning the flames.

A moment later the pillow was on fire, a small inferno.

Bodil and James looked at it in horror.

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Tim had finished the downstroke of the "M." Then he stepped back, seeming to consider what to do next. He tapped the bloody knife idly against his teeth as he thought. His blank, uncaring eyes stared into Danny's skull with pain and fear.

Then Tim smiled. He placed one hand on Danny's jaw and squeezed. After a moment of resistance, Danny opened his mouth, gasping. As soon as he did, Tim reached in, his sausage-like fingers barely fitting through the gateway of Danny's teeth. Then, slicked with Danny's saliva, they slipped in—and a second later emerged again, Danny's tongue clasped between them.

With his free hand, Tim lifted his knife and brought it against the edge of Danny's tongue. Danny would have screamed then, if he'd been able to. There was a terrible ringing in his head, like the sound of absolute terror.

Then his head sagged back as Tim released his tongue to reach inside his jacket pocket. Only when he pulled out a cell phone did Danny realize that the ringing had been real.

"Yeah?" Tim barked into the phone. "I'm kinda busy here."

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Bodil reacted more rationally than James, which he might have found ironic if he hadn't been hysterical with fear. She rushed to the window and began trying to force it open, to give the insects some avenue of escape. There were even more of them now, hundreds, swarming round the ceiling with their horrible, threatening buzzing.

The smoke from the fire on the bed seemed to be driving them insane as the volume and pitch of that buzz rose and rose with every billow of smoke.

But the window was stuck, it just wouldn't move. Even though they'd opened it with ease earlier, now it wouldn't budge an inch. The hornets were flying around Bodil's head, their wings brushing against her skin. She desperately fought the urge to brush them away, knowing that this would just provoke their stings and instead, gritting her teeth, she set her shoulder against the clasp of the window, using all her weight to force it open.

James had finally recovered himself enough to do something about the fire. He rushed to the door and a second later rushed back with the small fire extinguisher that had been stowed there. After a moment of fumbling, he seemed to find the on switch and a spurt of foam shot out towards the bed.

Bodil continued her grim struggle to open the window. As if they sensed what she was doing, more and more hornets clustered around her. She felt one settle on the back of her hand, another on her cheek.

"James," she shouted out, wanting him to do something, anything to get the creatures away from her. But James seemed determined to ensure that no solitary spark of flame could possibly remain on the bed. The whole thing was a mass of foam now, like a club night Bodil had gone to once in Ibiza and he still kept on spraying.

"James!" Bodil screamed as one of the insects began to crawl slowly up her nose.

He heard her that time. Throwing down the fire extinguisher, he rushed towards her.

Over the foam-slicked floor.

She could see his expression of fear as his feet lost all traction and he skidded helplessly over the linoleum towards her.

About a second before he reached her, she finally managed to get the window open. The pane shot upward, leaving a clear gap into the air outside, at the exact moment that James—hoping to stop his slide—reached his hands out towards it.

His hands shot through the window and, carried by the momentum of his slide, his body shot after. A wave of hornets shot to



freedom after him.

Bodil didn't know how she reacted so quickly. As he tumbled out, she grabbed one of his hands, arresting his swing so that he fell, clattering and letting out a yell of pain against the wall of the hotel, hanging from the window by one hand. Bodil let out a cry of her own as his sudden weight nearly yanked her shoulder out of its socket. But she clung on.

A moment later, she felt the weight release as he grasped hold of the windowsill instead of her arm. She stood out and peered out at him. He was only clinging on with one hand. The other arm was dangling by his side, injured and useless. His face was tense with strain. "I can't hold on much longer," he gritted.

With the lightning fast mental calculation that only sheer terror can induce, Bodil hurriedly considered then discarded options. She knew that she could never haul him up on her own. She just wasn't strong enough. She'd have to find a way to help him from below. But by the time she got there he might already have let go.

Then she remembered the chains. "Hold on!" she said and rushed to the door. She'd hammered the chains in pretty tightly but panic gave her incredible strength and somehow she wrenched them out with her bare fingers. Then she went back to James.

"Please," he said when she reappeared. "Can't..."

She didn't bother to answer him, just wrapped one end of the thick chain around his wrist, and knotted it, then took the other and—after a second's search—attached it to the radiator beneath the window. "It's okay," she said, "you can let go now."

She looked outside again to find that he already had. He was dangling by that arm, swaying slightly in the breeze against the building.

"Thanks," he said breathlessly. He smiled at her and she found herself grinning back. Apart from being absolutely terrifying, she had to admit that this vacation had been pretty damn exciting.

Then she rushed to the door and began pulling the planks away so that she could go downstairs to fetch him some help.

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Tim clicked off the phone. He turned to look at first Danny, then Kate, his eyes as unreadable as ever. Danny felt his guts clench with fear, especially when Tim's eyes lingered on Kate. He didn't think he could stand to see done to Kate what had already been done to him. He hoped that Tim would kill him first.

He was so clenched up with fear that he almost didn't hear what Tim said next. "Why didn't ya tell me it wasn't you?" he said to Kate.

Kate moved her mouth, but it took a few seconds before any words emerged. "What?"

"I just heard. We found the people that did it. And you didn't have nothing to do with them."

"But, but I told you that..." Danny could see the first faint dawning of hope in Kate's face. He felt it himself.

Tim folded his arms. He didn't seem that bothered about the latest development. But then through it all he'd never seemed that bothered about anything. "Then why the hell did you tell Tony he was going to get shot? How the fuck did you know that?"

Sudden understanding lit Kate's eyes. "Oh Christ. Him. So that's... Oh Jesus." Then she seemed to hesitate over what to say. But she must have decided that by now she had nothing to lose. "I had a vision."

Tim's eyebrows rose, about the most expression he'd shown all night. "A vision. Get outta here!" Suddenly he sounded absurdly jovial, as if he was just chewing the fat with old friends.

"Honestly," Kate said, desperation to be believed in her voice. "I see things, how people are gonna die. I don't know why. I can't explain it. But it just happens. I swear."

Tim studied her a long moment. Then he leaned back. He looked, Danny thought with a relief more intense than any he'd ever experienced, as if he was convinced. "Fuck," he sighed. "Well, it's a shame you didn't tell me this earlier. Would have saved us all a lot of trouble."

Then he pulled out his knife again and walked up to Kate. "Plus, I wouldn't have to kill you now."

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Bodil virtually flew down the stairs. Only when she reached the bottom did it occur to her that she could easily have fallen and broken her neck. All she could think was that the longer James hung there, the more ways death would find to finish him off.

When she got outside she let out a gasp of relief to see James still dangling there. Even twenty feet below him, she could see that his hand was blue where the chain was cutting off the circulation from his arm. But at least he was still alive.

And there was more good news. Parked directly underneath him was a tow truck, its back wheel fully on the sidewalk and blocking it for a pair of irritated elderly pedestrians. She guessed he'd been trying to U-turn to escape from the gridlocked traffic ahead of him. But the traffic in the opposite direction was equally unmoving, and instead he'd ended up stranded, front end protruding halfway into the other lane, provoking irate hooting from all the surrounding cars.

It was perfect. His tow arm was up. From there, she should be able to grab hold of James, support him while he undid his wrist and then lower him to the ground. Even as she was thinking it, she was hauling herself onto the back of the truck, then scrambling up the forty-five degree incline of the tow arm. She'd never been very good with heights and she felt a lurching in her stomach as she realized just how high above the hard concrete surface of the sidewalk this was taking her. But she quashed it and carried on climbing. James had seen her now. He managed a weak, strained smile. She could see that he was in agony but she ignored that too because she had to concentrate on climbing and then very soon she'd be able to make sure he was okay.

When she reached the top of the tow arm, she clasped her knees firmly around it, careful not to look down at the drop below. Then, slowly, she sat upright. Only when she was fully straight, and balanced, did she open her eyes to find James staring into hers not more than a foot away.

It was going to work. She reached out and firmly put her arms around his waist, ready to support his weight while he undid his arm.

At the moment her arms touched him, every single traffic light for a ten-block stretch suddenly flicked to green. It must have been an electrical short. It wasn't meant to happen that way. The lane of traffic that had previously been blocked solid suddenly found its path clear. A thousand feet stepped on a thousand pedals and like a great single-minded creature the traffic began to move.

The tow truck found the way in front of it suddenly, miraculously, free. The driver, at the end of a fourteen-hour shift and desperate for the food and the lay that his girlfriend had promised him as soon as he got home, stamped his foot down on the gas.

The truck lurched forward in a sudden spurt of speed. The tow cable, which had been lying curled in the bottom of the truck, was flung violently upwards.

It curled, with absolute precision, around James's waist, just above where Bodil's arms were claspng him. Then, the hook at its end fell over the first loop of metal cable, securing it in place.

The truck continued to move.

James's arm was attached to the radiator by a length of steel chain, the strongest he'd been able to find. His body was attached to the truck by a length of steel cable, strong enough to pull an SUV. And the truck was moving away from the window.

Something had to give. It wasn't going to be the steel chain, or the steel cable. The weakest link in the chain was James's flesh.

The first thing to give was his skin, tearing apart into ragged strips, just above his elbow joint. It didn't feel that painful, no more than a mild burning. The real agony didn't arrive until his flesh began to pull apart, sticking to the bone like undercooked meat but coming away above that in an ever widening tear. Until finally the white rounded bones of the joint themselves were exposed, held together by yellow lengths of tendon.

James had only just begun to scream when the tendons snapped with a rubbery twang and his arm was torn off at the elbow.

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"Please," Danny said, "there's no need. We won't tell anyone what's... We won't talk."

Tim's knife was only inches from his throat now. Tim didn't even hesitate. He just shook his head. "Kid, everyone talks. I'm sorry, you know, and for the..."

He waved a vague hand, as if the hours of torture had been some mild social faux pas. Then he brought the knife back up.

When it was only an inch away, he became aware of the noise, the sudden roaring sound which echoed around the high roof of the warehouse like some furious, trapped beast. He and Danny both snapped their heads round towards it.

So Tim was looking right at Louise as her motorbike slammed into his chest at approximately forty miles an hour.

His body flew through the air like the world's largest rag doll. For a moment it seemed to hang suspended at the zenith of its climb. Then it fell straight down—to land impaled on the meat hook from which Kate's arms were suspended.

There was a meaty thump, then a fountain of blood from Tim's mouth, before the front of the hook pushed its way through the final layer of resistance to emerge from his chest. For the first time, Danny saw a real expression in the man's eyes: fear and the imminent knowledge of his own death. Then, slowly, all expression left them forever.

Danny didn't ever think he'd loved his sister more. He looked at her, and he meant to smile and say, "What took you so long?" but he found that when he opened his mouth all that emerged was a sob. She put her arms around him and held him silently, and he could feel the hot warmth of her tears against his cheek.

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For a second, Bodil found herself teetering on top of the tow arm, holding James's body in her arms. He was screaming, a horribly long thin continuous sound that didn't seem like it was ever going to stop. His blood gushed from the stump of his arm with such force it hit the blank brick wall of the hotel ten feet behind them. Now that it wasn't

under tension, the steel cord around his waist released itself, clanging metallicly back down on the bed of the truck.

The truck continued, oblivious, still accelerating as it curved round to take the other lane, narrowly avoiding the window of the shop opposite.

But the path wasn't entirely clear. As the back wheels moved off the sidewalk beside the hotel, they caught on something just at the edge of the curb. A nail. It pierced straight through the rubber of the tire, blowing it out in an explosion of stale compressed air.

This, finally, the driver did notice. Cursing, he slammed on the brakes.

The truck began to slow down. But James and Bodil, no longer attached to it in any way, didn't. Like a catapult releasing its load, the tow arm of the truck sprung upwards, sending them flying through the air in a flailing arc.

The arc ended at the window of the store opposite. James had passed out from loss of blood by this time. Bodil was still conscious. She reached out her arms in a futile attempt to halt their motion. But all that ensured was that they received the brunt of the impact against the glass. The finger bones of both hands shattered. Then, a moment later, the glass gave. Shards of it tore through her arms, stripping the skin off like a man peeling an orange. One segment shattered and sent splinters deep into the soft flesh of her belly and breasts.

Finally she was through with just one second to see the display ahead of her. The rack after rack of umbrellas, tips all pointed towards the window. The first one took her through her shattered hand, neatly piercing the palm. The next entered her mouth and emerged through her cheek. The third traveled straight through her heart, stopping it for good. So she wasn't alive to feel as the rest pierced her thighs and arms and feet and stomach, making pincushions of her organs. She never saw James suffer the same fate beside her. She would have been glad to know that she didn't need to watch him die.

# THIRTEEN

Louise wanted to take them both to the hospital, but Danny insisted that they had to go back and make sure the other three were okay. Louise felt a physical pain every time she looked at his battered face and his ruined ear. She almost hadn't recognized him when she'd first seen him. The skin of his face was swollen tight and red, his mouth split and bloody, his eyes nearly lost in folds of swollen flesh. She'd seen what had happened to his body, too. And when they'd told her that it was because of Kate she'd felt an urge to strike the other woman so strong that she'd had to curl her hands into hard fists to prevent herself from doing it.

But she didn't argue with Danny now. She didn't think he had the strength for it. Instead, she went out to buy clothes for the two of them in a nearby discount store, then put them on her bike and took them back to the hotel.

"Shouldn't we do something about Tim's... About Tim's body?" Kate shouted forward to her above the wind of their passage.

"What, report it to the police?" Louise asked. "What are you gonna say? I mean really, how the hell do you think you can explain it?" She realized that she sounded furious and shut her mouth, biting down hard on her lip to keep from saying anything that Danny wouldn't want her to.

"We can't tell the police," Danny said wearily. "Because if it's public then whoever Tim worked for will find out we killed him and they'll come after us."

Kate seemed to accept that and she didn't say anything more for the rest of the journey.

When they arrived back at the hotel, they could see that it was already too late. The ambulances were still there, extracting the bodies from the shop opposite. Louise didn't want to look. She'd enough of pain and death. But Danny said that they needed to know, to see how far down the list death had come and she couldn't let him go through that, not after the day he'd had, so she went up to the paramedics herself.

"Stand back, miss," one of them said. "You don't want to see this."

Louise couldn't have agreed more but she didn't have any choice so she ignored him and pushed forward, her feet crunching on the shattered glass of the store window.

The paramedic tried to hold her back but she said, "I think they're my friends," and he stepped aside, a pitying expression on his face.

In the end, it was only the clothes that allowed her to identify them. Their faces were mangled beyond recognition. The paramedic put his arm on her shoulder, trying to draw her away, but she couldn't stop looking at them, hanging limp and impaled in front of her. Their skin was terribly white. She could see that all the blood that should have been coloring it had drained from their multiple wounds onto the floor.

After a moment, she noticed that James's arm was missing, torn from its socket at the elbow. It suggested he had suffered before he died. That bothered her more than anything else.

"Mary-Beth must be dead already then," Kate said dully when Louise brought the news back. "She was before them on the list."

"So it's just me and Danny," Louise said. She caught Kate's eye, wouldn't let it go. "We're not going to make it, are we? James and Bodil were trying to be careful, they knew they were in danger. They were up in their hotel rooms for fuck's sake, the paramedics said so and they still ending up being killed by a bunch of fucking umbrellas. There's just nothing we can do."

Kate didn't say anything. She avoided Louise's eyes.

"Come on, tell us!" Louise shouted. "You know, don't you? You get these fucking premonitions or whatever. Are me and Danny going to survive this or not?"

Kate swallowed. Then she clasped Louise's arm, hard. "I'm not going to let you die. Either of you." She turned to face Danny—and Louise saw that he was slumped against the motorbike, eyes closed, his face so drained and white he could have been dead already.

"Shit!" Louise rushed up to him and touched his face. He opened his eyes slightly, but she could see the effort it cost him.

"We've got to get him to the hospital," Kate said.



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They went on the back of Louise's bike. Kate protested, half-heartedly, that it had to be the most dangerous form of transport around, but Louise knew that at least with the bike she was in control. She literally couldn't face the idea of giving her life into anyone else's hands, not after everything she'd seen. She and Danny were the only things left that she trusted.

At the hospital, they stitched Danny up and put some blood into him, but when they offered him painkillers he waved them away. "Want to be thinking clearly," he said, and after a while the nurse shrugged and did as he asked.

They tried to ask questions, too, about how he'd got in that state, but he clammed up and Kate managed to deflect them. When they'd gone, Danny smiled in wan gratitude at Kate and took her hand. Louise looked away, angry.

She found that her eyes couldn't keep still, darting constantly around the room, looking for the source of danger, the seemingly innocent object that would turn around and kill them.

"Relax, Lou," Danny said, and she turned back to the bed to see that his eyes were brighter and he seemed to have returned to full consciousness.

"Yeah, Danno, that's really gonna happen," she said bitingly. Then she sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. "Sorry. It's not knowing where it's coming from. I could cope if I just knew what it was going to be."

Danny looked at her for a very long moment, not saying anything, a strange light in his golden eyes.

"What?" she said when he still hadn't spoken.

"What was it the mortician said?" he asked eventually. She could hear the excitement in his voice. It was the tone he got when he'd discovered a new route up a mountain that no one else had climbed before.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Some shit about everything being better once we'd died."

"No," Danny said, "he said that facing death, really facing it, would make us different people."

"Yeah. Well I feel pretty damn different to the way I felt five days ago."

"Except I don't think he was talking about us," Danny said. Then he turned to Kate. "I think he was talking about you."

"But I'm not the one death is after," Kate said.

Danny nodded. "Exactly. You've already faced death. Not the way we have—faced it and avoided it. You actually died. And I think that's the key."

Louise saw something in her brother's face that made her uneasy, an intense, almost fanatical light. "Danno, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the only way to win is to lose."

"You're saying we have to die?"

"And then come back," Danny said, smiling with an almost manic enthusiasm. "The way Kate did. When we come back we won't be the same people any more. We'll have changed—like the mortician said, into someone Death doesn't want. And even if he does want us, if we get like Kate, if we can see him coming, that's got to give us an advantage, hasn't it?" He looked at Kate pleadingly.

Kate looked far from convinced. "You don't want to go through what I went through, Danny," she said. "Believe me, it isn't worth it."

Although Louise thought Danny's idea was a terrible one, as soon as Kate came out against it she found herself defending him. "Isn't worth it? That's easy for you to say. You're not the one living under a death sentence. Are you really saying you'd rather die than have a few fucking visions?"

Kate didn't have any answer to that one.

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Kate took them to the new part of the hospital, the part that was still being built and was deserted at this time of night. It didn't escape her that this was where it had all started, for her at least, with the Sux racing which had changed her life forever. And now here she

was again, about to do to someone else what had been done to her, only this time she hoped to be saving lives rather than risking them.

She knew Danny had a point. And she knew Louise was right when she said that the pair of them had nothing left to lose. But she couldn't shake the feeling of dread that rose and rose inside her with every step she took into the concrete framework of the half-constructed building. It became so all-pervasive that she began to feel she was losing touch with reality. The outline of the room seemed to swim in front of her, suspended in some space outside of time.

Some part of her wondered, in a vague, floating, disassociated sort of way, if she was making a terrible mistake. In terms of her career she knew she was. She didn't think she'd been seen when she'd stolen the supplies she'd needed from the third-floor store cupboards, using a key she'd liberated from the nurse's station, but there was always a chance someone had been watching. And even if they hadn't, the next audit would find it missing and there'd be an enquiry. She felt absolutely certain that her temporary suspension was bound to become a permanent one.

She was surprised to find that she didn't really care that much. All her life, the one thing she'd known she wanted was to become a doctor. She couldn't quite imagine where all that drive and ambition had gone. Soaked into the ground, she supposed, with all the blood she'd seen spilled over the last few days. She felt now that she belonged to Death, somehow, was linked to it. She had no place in a hospital anymore, trying to save lives. That wasn't what the new Kate did.

And it was worth it to do this anyway, because it was for Danny and while she'd seen him being tortured by Tim she'd realized that she cared for him far too much for a boy she'd met only a few days ago.

But she didn't know if their relationship could survive what they'd been through. She knew that Louise blamed her for what had happened to Danny, she could see it in her eyes. Danny had held her in his arms after Tim had died and he'd told her that it wasn't her fault, but she wondered if he really believed that. Every time she

looked at Danny's horribly swollen face she felt a stab of such intense guilt she nearly doubled up with it, as if it was a physical pain.

Her hands were working automatically as her mind drifted over these thoughts. Louise was lying on a table they'd improvised from a slab of concrete and some spare planks. Danny had wanted to be the one to go first, of course, but it was clear he was in no state to be a guinea pig. That was one thing Louise and Kate did agree on.

"I still think it should be me," Danny said, looking down at his sister's body, lying beneath him, a drip attached to her arm, heart monitor to her chest. Beside her head were two ventilators, ready to revive her once the drug had done its work. Kate wasn't taking any chances this time.

"Forget it, Danno," Louise said firmly, though Kate could hear the slight shake in her voice. "Anyway, you got to be born first. Seems only fair I get to die first."

Neither of them smiled at this morbid joke. But after a moment, Danny took Louise's hand and clasped it against his chest. She could see that the move hurt him—it must have been an intolerable pressure against his bruised skin—but he didn't let go. He looked at Kate.

"I'm ready," Kate said. "Are you...?"

Louise nodded. "No point waiting, is there?" She swallowed hard.

Danny was still looking intently at Kate. "You're sure this is safe, right?"

"Of course it's not safe, Danny," she said, softening the words with a smile. "She's going to die. But given that, it's about as safe as it can be."

He hesitated a long moment, then nodded. "Do it then. It's the only way this will ever be over."

Kate dabbed a drop of anesthetic onto Louise's arm. Then, very carefully, she slipped the needle under her skin and gently depressed the plunger on the syringe.

Louise let out a soft gasp.

Danny didn't take his eyes off her, and Louise's remained locked on him. But Kate saw her gradually tense up, the muscles in her body

hardening until her spine began to arch gently away from the wooden surface of the table.

Kate felt a chill travel all the way from the back of her neck to her feet. Suxamethonium was supposed to relax muscles, not tense them. "What is it?" she said to Louise, trying to keep the worry about of her voice. "What are you feeling?"

Louise only managed a groan—which turned into a tearing cry of pain. Her back was arched almost half a foot off the table now. Her face was bright red, the muscles in her arms and throat knotted into cords.

Something was very wrong.

Danny realized it too. He looked at Kate, his damaged faced further deformed by panic. "What the hell's going on? I thought you said it wouldn't hurt?"

"It's not supposed to," Kate said frantically, as Louise led out another scream of pain.

"Do something!" Danny shouted.

Kate felt a moment of frozen inaction. She was only a med student. She shouldn't have been doing this; she didn't know what she was doing. She was utterly helpless.

But when she saw the terrible fear in Danny's eyes she managed to pull it together, a little. She knew that Louise was fitting. Her mouth was frothing now, the froth pink with her own blood. She'd probably bitten her tongue. And her arms and legs had begun to drum against the hard wooden surface of the table.

"Hold her down!" Kate said to Danny, grabbing at Louise's wildly flailing arm. Louise was screaming continuously now, a horrible wet bubbling sound, and it felt like she was fighting against Kate's hold with all her strength. Kate was forced to bear down on her with her full weight to keep her arms against the table. At Louise's feet Danny was having even more of a problem. She saw one foot break loose and take him across the jaw, which must have been agonizing in his condition, but Danny just grimaced and pressed down harder.

For a moment, they had control. "What's happening to her?" Danny asked, his face dripping with sweat and his eyes desperate.

And then Louise went limp. She saw the expression of relief on Danny's face, but something about the suddenness of it alarmed Kate, and when she looked down it was to see Louise's blank, unseeing eyes staring back up at her.

Horried, Danny looked at her. She could see the confusion in his eyes. He'd trusted her with his sister's life, and she'd betrayed him in the worst possible way.

"I don't... I don't understand," Kate whispered, frantically checking Louise's body for vital signs, for any explanation of what had happened, but she knew it was futile. "It can't... Suxamethonium, it just doesn't... It shouldn't ever do that."

"What did you say?" Danny asked. There was a strange note in his voice.

She looked up to see that he was holding the discarded vial with which she'd injected Louise.

"Suxamethonium," Kate said more clearly. "This isn't ever a side effect. I don't know how it could have done this to her."

"Maybe because you didn't use Suxamethonium," Danny said, each word as clear and sharp as a knife. "This vial says Lidocaine. For fuck's sake, Kate, what have you done?"

Kate grabbed the vial from him, not believing it, but she saw that he was right. She'd injected a local anesthetic instead of a general, far too much of it. It didn't seem possible. How was it possible? She stared at the vial in numb shock.

She was jerked out of it when Danny took her shoulders and shook her hard. "What's the antidote, Kate? How do we bring her back?" His eyes, which had looked into hers so lovingly only a few hours ago, were full of rage now.

For a moment, she didn't know. Then she remembered. "Adrenaline," she said. She searched frantically through the supplies she'd brought and, with a gasp of relief—found that she'd brought some, just in case.

Her hands shaking with haste and fear, she slipped some into a vial and attached it to a far larger syringe. Then, pulling Louise's clothing aside, tearing it in her hurry, she prepared to plunge it through her chest.

Danny grabbed her arm, his vice-like grip shooting tendrils of pain up her arm. "Let me do it, Danny," she said, as softly as she could. The doubt in his eyes hurt more than his grip. "It's the only thing that can save her."

Danny hesitated a moment, then let her go. "Please, Kate, don't let her die, don't..." His voice choked, unable to finish the sentence.

"I won't, I promise," Kate said—then plunged the thick needle down into Louise's chest as hard as she could.

There was an agonizing moment when nothing happened. The only sound in the empty white room was the rasp of Danny's breathing. He turned to look at her and she thought that he really would kill her.

Then, with a sucking gasp, Louise came back. Her eyes flicked open, looking straight into Kate's. They seemed to be filled with a new knowledge. "You tried to kill me," she said. Her voice was a dry rasp, which somehow made the accusation sound even more horrible.

Kate backed away, shaking her head. "Of course not. It was a mistake, an accid..." but even as she said it she couldn't see how that was possible. She'd checked everything so carefully.

Louise pressed her hands against the table. Slowly, and painfully, she sat up. The syringe still protruded from the front of her chest, wobbling slightly as she moved. "It was you," she said. "It was you all the time..."

Danny stared at his sister, then at Kate. She could see the confusion on his face, the struggle to understand what was going on.

"But why?" Kate said. "Why would I do that?"

Louise seemed very calm, and very certain. "Because you came back, but the person who came back wasn't the same one who died. You brought death back with you."

"No," Kate said, frantically shaking her head, backing away. The empty vial of adrenaline dropped from her suddenly numb fingers. "It's not true."

"Of course it isn't!" Danny said to Louise, but Kate could hear just a sliver of doubt in his voice. "Kate's been helping us, right? Right, Kate?" He looked at her intently, searching for reassurance, but he

couldn't seem to find any. His mouth set in a thinner, harder line. "Kate, is it true? Have you been working against us all this time?"

Kate opened her mouth to deny it. And then she remembered.

She remembered slipping into a room in the hospital where a sick man was shortly to be given his bath. She'd meant to give him antibiotics, but the needle she slipped under his skin contained a strong sedative. Half an hour later, he fell asleep. The bath he was in overflowed. Rinoka died.

In the zoo, running to see the fire, she'd dropped her bag. She'd dropped it in exactly the spot where a fireman could later trip over it. The spray from his hose caught Peter in the chest and sent him to his death.

She'd stopped Danny to talk to him on the way out of the hospital. And because she'd stopped him, he and the others had been right in the path of the falling scanner. Only Danny's quick thinking had saved them that time.

She'd eaten a banana during their picnic on the park, casually tossed the skin to one side. Later, Jack had slipped on the skin. And died.

Every morning, leaving her apartment, she'd walked down her street and brushed against the scaffolding that blocked half the sidewalk. Every morning, against the very same spot, the same bolt. When the scaffolding had fallen, the loosened bolt had given way and Mary-Beth had died.

When she'd first visited Danny in the hotel, she'd gone to use the bathroom, the bathroom on the fourth floor, not the second. Inside the bathroom she'd tripped, her foot catching the base of the sink, jarring it, allowing a trickle of water to leak through into the floor, ultimately driving the nest of hornets below to seek escape through the wall of James's room.

And when she'd injected Louise, she'd injected Lidocaine, not Suxamethonium.

She remembered it all, now.

"I didn't know," she said, "I didn't know what I was doing."

She saw a light splutter and die in Danny's eyes. "No, Kate. No, Lou, it can't be true. It's just... we're all tired, scared. You're



imagining it." He walked towards Kate, hands extended pleadingly. "I'm sorry I was angry with you earlier. I didn't mean it. I know you didn't mean to hurt Lou."

Louise joined him in walking towards Kate, but her expression was far less warm. The syringe still protruded obscenely from her chest. "She did it, Danno, she killed them all."

"No..." But Danny stopped walking forwards. His hands dropped helplessly to his sides. He could see the truth in Kate's eyes.

"They all died because of me," she said, "and I didn't even know I was doing it. Death's been using me all this time, ever since I crossed the line. The mortician was right. It did turn me into a different person. A dangerous person."

She looked at Danny and she knew that even realizing this she was still going to kill him. She didn't know how, or where, but she'd do something and then there'd be no more Danny King in the world.

She couldn't bear that thought. And if she was a new person, it wasn't one she could live with. Before she could have second thoughts, or before death could try to stop her, she pulled the syringe from Louise's chest.

Then, as hard as she could, she stabbed it down into her own, straight into her heart.

The pain was agonizing. Her legs twisted under her, knees buckling, but she held them steady, just long enough, then grasped the base of the syringe firmly in both hands and twisted. There was a moment more of excruciating agony as the metal tip ripped through the muscular walls of her heart, wrecking it beyond repair.

Then, slowly, her vision began to fade to gray. This time there'd be no coming back. She didn't want there to be. But as the last light left the world, she saw Danny's golden eyes looking into hers, and she thought that it was probably worth it.

# EPILOGUE

The bruises had almost faded from Danny's face, only a shadowing round his eyes remaining as evidence of the savage beating he'd taken. The plastic surgeon had worked on his ear and on the marks on his chest and he said that with time they might be erased completely. Danny didn't think the same could be said of the emotional wounds he'd suffered in New York, but he'd made a start.

He paused, skidding the mountain bike to a halt near one of the precipitous drops that cut through the desert landscape. Louise drew her bike up beside him and looked at him quizzically. "Everything okay?" she asked.

He nodded, but didn't say anything. There was something about the flat blue of the early morning sky over the complex maze of ravines that invited silence. He smiled a little, though, as he thought about how much Louise had changed. It was almost as if their roles had reversed. She was so protective of him now. Their parents—who had been told as little as possible about the details of their trip—were baffled. It was like they'd sent a fifteen year-old girl to Manhattan and got a twenty year-old woman back.

Danny didn't think the changes in him were so obvious, but he knew they were there. He thought about Kate a lot, about what they'd had between them. And he'd forgiven her, of course, for what she'd done to them. He had to. She hadn't known what she was doing. And when she'd found out, she'd made the ultimate sacrifice.

But what he'd had with Kate had showed him what he could have. He didn't think he'd be going through the usual fresher series of casual conquests and one-night stands. He'd wait until he could find the right person.

The sun beat down on his head and he squinted up at it, enjoying the hard warmth of it. It would be colder in New York, he knew, and he was heading off there tomorrow to start at NYU. Louise would be okay; she was going to San Diego, land of perpetual sun and parties.

She would be okay though, he was confident of that now. He looked at her and found her looking back at him, an open affection

on her face that she would have hidden a few months ago.

Then she grinned and looked exactly like the bratty little sister he'd always known. "Last one back to camp's a dork," she said.

Before she'd even finished the sentence she was cycling off, knees pumping to push the bike up the steep incline ahead of them. A second later, Danny pushed off after her. He felt a wild joy and exhilaration, and he was grateful to Kate that he was around to feel it.

Then he gave all his concentration to the race. Louise was already a good ten feet ahead of him, skirting the edge of a ravine at right angles to his course. He pressed down on the pedals of the mountain bike, flicking the gearshift with his thumb, trying to build up as much speed as possible before he had to swerve aside from the ravine.

Only when he was at the very edge did he squeeze the brakes as he wrenched the wheel away from the hundred-foot drop onto jagged rocks below.

But the brakes didn't bite.

The cycle swerved, but it was traveling too fast. The wheel skidded along the ground, almost horizontally, and then there was no ground anymore and the bike, with Danny still clinging to it, was flying through the air, curving against the clear blue sky in a trajectory that would only end on the rocks below.

In the few seconds he had left, Danny had a very vivid memory of Louise checking his bike that morning, fixing the brakes while he filled their water bottles from the pipe in the yard.

And he remembered that Louise, for a very short while, had died too. And now Death had someone else to serve it.